

Issue At A Glance:

Federal Nutrition Assistance Programs in the United States

Nutrition is a critical aspect of health and development as it promotes stronger immune systems, lowers risk of non-communicable diseases, and supports longevity. This brief will provide an overview of the federal nutrition assistance programs administered by the Food and Nutrition Service.

Introduction

Healthy bodies require nutrient-packed meals at every age, but research on the American diet and overall health are not encouraging.^{1,2,3} In the U.S., approximately 678,000 deaths occur each year due to nutrition- and obesity-related diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, and type 2 diabetes.¹ Nearly 46% of Americans have poor quality diet due to consuming high amounts of salt, sugar-sweetened beverages, and highly processed foods.³ Furthermore, in 2020, over 11.8% of U.S. households reported some level of food insecurity, with over one-third (37.7%) of adults and 17% of children reported as clinically obese.²

In partnership with state and tribal governments, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) under the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) aims to increase food security and to reduce hunger by providing children and low-income individuals with access to nutritious food and nutrition education, along with support to the American agricultural industry.⁴

This brief will provide an overview of the 15 federal nutrition assistance programs administered by the FNS to increase food security and reduce hunger in the United States.

Relevant Statistics⁵

- 55%** Of American households are eating at home more often since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.
- 17.4%** Of individuals live in low-income areas and low-access areas (i.e., living more than a mile from the nearest supermarket or grocery store in urban areas or at least 10 miles away in rural areas).
- 10.5%** Of U.S. households experienced food insecurity in 2020.
- 4.1%** Of U.S. households experienced very low food security in 2019, which is defined as cutting or skipping meals and not eating enough due to financial constraints.

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SNAP and USDA Food Distribution Programs

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Reaching 38 million people nationwide in 2019 alone, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) was established as a safety net against hunger for Americans with low income.^{6,7} SNAP benefits help supplement an individual or a family's income to buy nutritious foods.⁸ To be eligible, a household's income and resources must meet three thresholds: (1) household income must be at or below 130% of the poverty line; (2) net income must be at or below the poverty line; and (3) assets must fall below certain limits.⁹ SNAP participants, on average, received an estimated \$127/month in fiscal year 2021, with an additional \$92/month per person in temporary pandemic-related benefits for a total of \$219/person.¹⁰

Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)

The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) provides USDA Foods, which are foods grown and produced in the U.S., to income-eligible households living on Indian reservations. This program is provided as an alternative to SNAP for households who do not have easy access to SNAP offices or authorized food stores.^{11,12}

Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) provides low-income elderly persons at least 60 years of age with USDA Foods.¹³ Rather than providing full meal kits, CSFP provides beneficiaries with sources of nutrients that are typically lacking in the diets of the beneficiary population, such as dry cereal, milk, peanut butter, and canned fruits and vegetables.^{14,15}

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) helps supplement the diets of low-income persons through the distribution of various USDA Foods that are made available to state distribution agencies, such as food banks, soup kitchens, and food pantries.^{16,17}

Disaster Assistance

The FNS provides supplemental assistance when disasters occur by coordinating with state, local, and voluntary organizations to provide food for shelters, distribute food packages to households in specific situations, and approve eligible states' requests to operate a Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP).²

Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion

The Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP) was created within the USDA with a mission "to improve the health of Americans by developing and promoting dietary guidance that links scientific research to the nutrition needs of consumers."¹⁸ The CNPP carries out its mission to improve the health of Americans through the advancement and promotion of food and nutrition guidance; assessment of diet quality; and the advancement of consumer, nutrition, and food economic knowledge.^{18,19}



Programs for Women, Infants, Children and Elderly

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

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, along with infants and children up to the age of 5, with supplemental foods, healthcare referrals, and nutrition education through federal grants provided to states.²⁰

Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP)

As part of the WIC, the Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) was established to provide fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables to WIC participants and to expand the awareness, utilization, and sales at farmers' markets. Beneficiaries receive FMNP coupons in addition to their regular WIC benefits to buy eligible foods from farmers, farmers' markets, or roadside stands that have been approved to accept FMNP coupons.²¹

Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP)

The Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program provides low-income individuals who are at least 60 years and older and who have household incomes below 185% of the federal poverty income guidelines with access to locally grown fruits, vegetables, honey, and herbs.²²

Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides reimbursements for meals and snacks to eligible children and adults who are enrolled for care at participating childcare centers, day care homes, and adult day care centers.²³

School-based Nutrition Programs

Currently, there are numerous efforts to improve nutrition among children through school-based nutrition programs. These programs include:

- **The National School Lunch Program (NSLP)**, which provides students in both public and nonprofit private schools with nutritionally balanced free or reduced price lunches each school day.²⁴
- **The School Breakfast Program (SBP)**, which provides free or reduced price breakfast to all income eligible children.²⁵
- **The Special Milk Program (SMP)**, which provides milk to children in schools and childcare institutions that do not participate in other federal meal service programs.²⁶
- **The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)**, also known as the Summer Meals Program, which provides children age 18 and younger in low-income areas with free meals during the summer months when school is not in session.²⁷
- **The Fresh Fruits and Vegetable Program (FFVP)**, which provides students at eligible elementary schools with free fruits and vegetables to introduce children to new and different varieties of fruits and vegetables and to increase overall acceptance and consumption.²⁸

USDA Foods in School

The USDA's Foods in School program supports American agricultural producers through purchases of domestic agriculture products for distribution in schools and institutions and supports child nutrition programs by providing produce to the NSLP, the CACFP, and the SFSP.²⁹

Conclusion

The FNS administers 15 nutrition assistance programs to address the issue of hunger in the United States, aiding one in four individuals each year, from infants to the elderly.⁴ In partnership with public, private, and non-profit sectors, the FNS programs increase food security and reduce hunger by providing children and low-income individuals access to nutritious food, a balanced diet, and nutrition education while supporting the American agricultural industry.⁴ The application process and eligibility for each program may vary from state to state.

It is important for children to maintain a healthy diet to allow them to grow and develop properly while reducing their risk of chronic diseases. Among adults, a healthy diet can increase lifespan and lower the risk of obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers.³⁰ When healthy foods are unavailable or inaccessible, people may settle for foods that are higher in calories and lower in nutritional value. The FNS programs aim to mitigate the gaps in inaccessibility to nutritious, fresh produce for Americans in low-income communities through the 15 nutrition assistance programs.

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Did you know?

About 74% of American adults are overweight and obese, with adults ages 40-59 years old having a 43% rate of obesity – the highest of any age group.

Additionally, adults 60 years and older have a 41% rate of obesity.⁵



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