



## Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Nutrition,  
Committee on Agriculture, House of  
Representatives

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# DOMESTIC FOOD ASSISTANCE

Multiple Programs Benefit  
Millions of Americans, but  
Additional Action Is  
Needed to Address  
Potential Overlap and  
Inefficiencies

Statement of Kay E. Brown, Director, Education,  
Workforce, and Income Security

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-606T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Nutrition, Committee on Agriculture, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government spends billions of dollars each year on food and nutrition programs. USDA administers most of these programs.

This testimony provides: (1) an overview of domestic food assistance programs, and (2) an update on past GAO recommendations in this area. It is based largely on an April 2010 report ([GAO-10-346](#)) and a 2015 update on actions USDA has taken to address that report's recommendation. To develop the findings for the 2010 report, GAO analyzed program spending data and studies on program effectiveness, reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations, interviewed relevant experts and officials, and conducted site visits in five states, selected for diversity in geography and service delivery models. For the 2015 update, GAO analyzed federal spending and program participation data.

## What GAO Recommends

In April 2010, GAO recommended that the Secretary of Agriculture take action to address potential inefficiency and overlap among food assistance programs while ensuring those who are eligible receive the assistance they need. USDA has taken some action but has not fully addressed this recommendation. GAO believes more can be done in response to this recommendation.

View [GAO-15-606T](#). For more information, contact Kay E. Brown at (202) 512-7215 or [brownke@gao.gov](mailto:brownke@gao.gov).

May 20, 2015

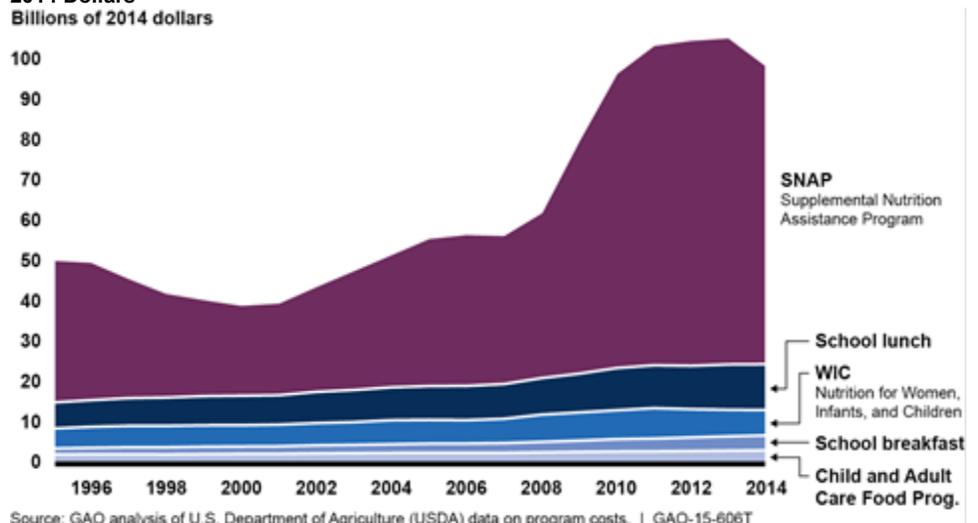
## DOMESTIC FOOD ASSISTANCE

### Multiple Programs Benefit Millions of Americans, but Additional Action Is Needed to Address Potential Overlap and Inefficiencies

## What GAO Found

The federal government spent over \$100 billion on 18 domestic food assistance programs in fiscal year 2014. Federal spending on the five largest food assistance programs has increased over the last 20 years, driven largely by increases in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) following the recession of 2007-2009.

**Federal Spending on the Five Largest Programs from Fiscal Year 1995 to 2014, Adjusted to 2014 Dollars**



Federal food assistance is provided through a decentralized system that involves multiple federal, state, and local organizations. The complex network of 18 food assistance programs, administered by three federal agencies, emerged piecemeal over several decades to meet various needs. In 2010, research GAO reviewed suggested that participation in seven of these programs was associated with positive outcomes, such as improving nutrition among low-income households. Little was known about the effectiveness of the remaining 11.

In 2010, GAO recommended that USDA identify and develop methods for addressing potential inefficiencies among food assistance programs and reducing overlap among the smaller programs. GAO found that some programs provide comparable benefits to a similar population, but are managed separately, which is a potentially inefficient use of federal funds. In 2013, USDA commissioned a study on the feasibility and potential cost to assess the extent of overlap and duplication among these programs and, based on the results, decided to study the impact of participation in multiple food assistance programs on the nutritional status of participants. While such a study will provide important information, it does not address GAO's recommendation. GAO continues to believe that further action is needed. For example, USDA could convene a group of experts to discuss potential inefficiencies and overlap, such as administrative costs across multiple agencies, and develop proposals to address them.

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Chairwoman Walorski, Ranking Member McGovern, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting me to discuss federally funded domestic food assistance programs. The federal government spends billions of dollars every year on food and nutrition assistance programs, which benefit millions of Americans. The nation's largest food assistance program—the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—provided more than \$74 billion in benefits in fiscal year 2014 to over 46 million people in an average month. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers most of these programs. This testimony provides: (1) an overview of domestic food assistance programs, and (2) an update on the recommendation we made in this area.

My testimony today is largely based on a report we issued in April 2010 that examined domestic food assistance programs.<sup>1</sup> To develop the findings for our 2010 report, we analyzed food security and program spending data, reviewed studies on program effectiveness, reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations, interviewed relevant experts, and interviewed government officials and local food assistance providers from five states (California, Illinois, Maryland, Oregon, and Texas). The states were selected to take into account geographic variation and diversity in the group of local agencies providing program services. To identify federally funded domestic food assistance programs for our 2010 report, we searched the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance to identify relevant programs, obtained supplementary information from federal agencies, and reviewed related federal legislation. The programs selected focused primarily on providing food and nutrition assistance to low-income individuals and households. This statement also provides updated information on federal spending and program participation in the 18 food assistance programs that we identified in our 2010 report. More details on our scope and methodology can be found in the issued report.

The work this statement is based on was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions

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<sup>1</sup> GAO, *Domestic Food Assistance: Complex System Benefits Millions, but Additional Efforts Could Address Potential Inefficiency and Overlap among Smaller Programs*, [GAO-10-346](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 15, 2010).

based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

## The Federal Government Spent More Than \$100 Billion on 18 Food Assistance Programs in Fiscal Year 2014

The federal government spent more than \$100 billion in fiscal year 2014 on 18 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs. Programs' spending amounts ranged from approximately \$5 million on the Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program to more than \$74 billion on SNAP (see table 1). In our 2010 report, we found that the federal government spent approximately \$62.7 billion on these programs in fiscal year 2008.

**Table 1: Federal Spending on 18 Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs in Fiscal Year 2014**

Programs and funding streams	Fiscal year 2014 spending (in millions)
SNAP	74,596.9
National School Lunch Program	11,289.7
Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)	7,144.8
School Breakfast Program	3,716.1
Child and Adult Care Food Program	3,111.9
Nutrition Assistance for Puerto Rico <sup>a</sup>	1,902.8
Elderly Nutrition Program: Home-Delivered and Congregate Nutrition Services <sup>b,c</sup>	811.2
The Emergency Food Assistance Program	635.9
Summer Food Service Program	464.4
Commodity Supplemental Food Program	180.9
Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program	167.7
Emergency Food and Shelter National Board Program <sup>c</sup>	120.0
Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations	119.1
Grants to American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Organizations for Nutrition and Supportive Services <sup>c</sup>	26.2
Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program	20.6
WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program	19.6
Special Milk Program	10.7
Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program <sup>c</sup>	5.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>104,343.5</b>

Source: GAO analysis of fiscal year 2016 congressional budget justifications for USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, HHS' Administration on Aging, and DHS' Federal Emergency Management Agency. | GAO-15-606T

Note: Unless otherwise noted, funding amounts represent fiscal year 2014 obligations.

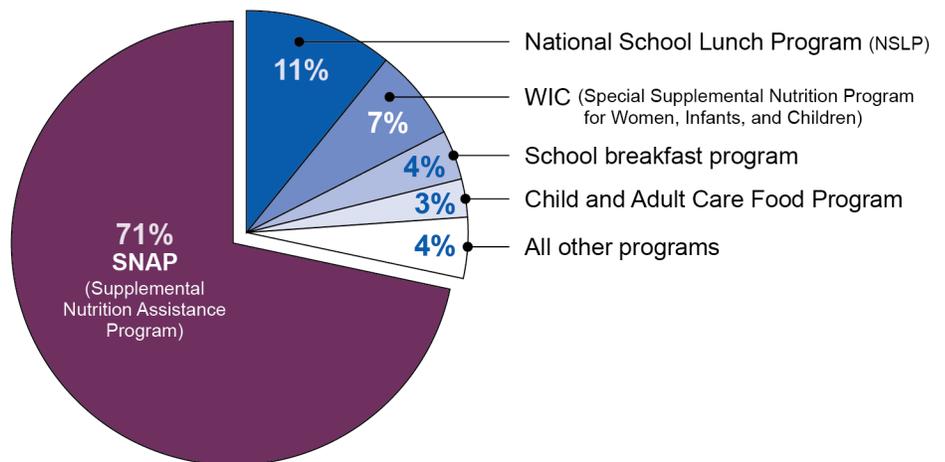
<sup>a</sup>Total includes funding provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

<sup>b</sup> The Elderly Nutrition Program total also includes funding for the Nutrition Services Incentive Program.

<sup>c</sup>This figure is a fiscal year 2014 appropriation reported by the agency.

In fiscal year 2014, the five largest food assistance programs—SNAP, the National School Lunch Program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the School Breakfast Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program—accounted for 96 percent of total spending on the 18 programs. SNAP, the largest program, accounted for more than 70 percent of the overall spending total (see fig. 1). The largest five food assistance programs are all entitlement programs—except for WIC—meaning that, by law, they must provide benefits to all applicants that meet eligibility requirements. This means that participation and benefits for these programs are not capped, unlike programs that are appropriated specific spending amounts, such as the Commodity Supplemental Food Program or the Elderly Nutrition Program.

**Figure 1: Percentage of Food Assistance Spending by Program in Fiscal Year 2014**

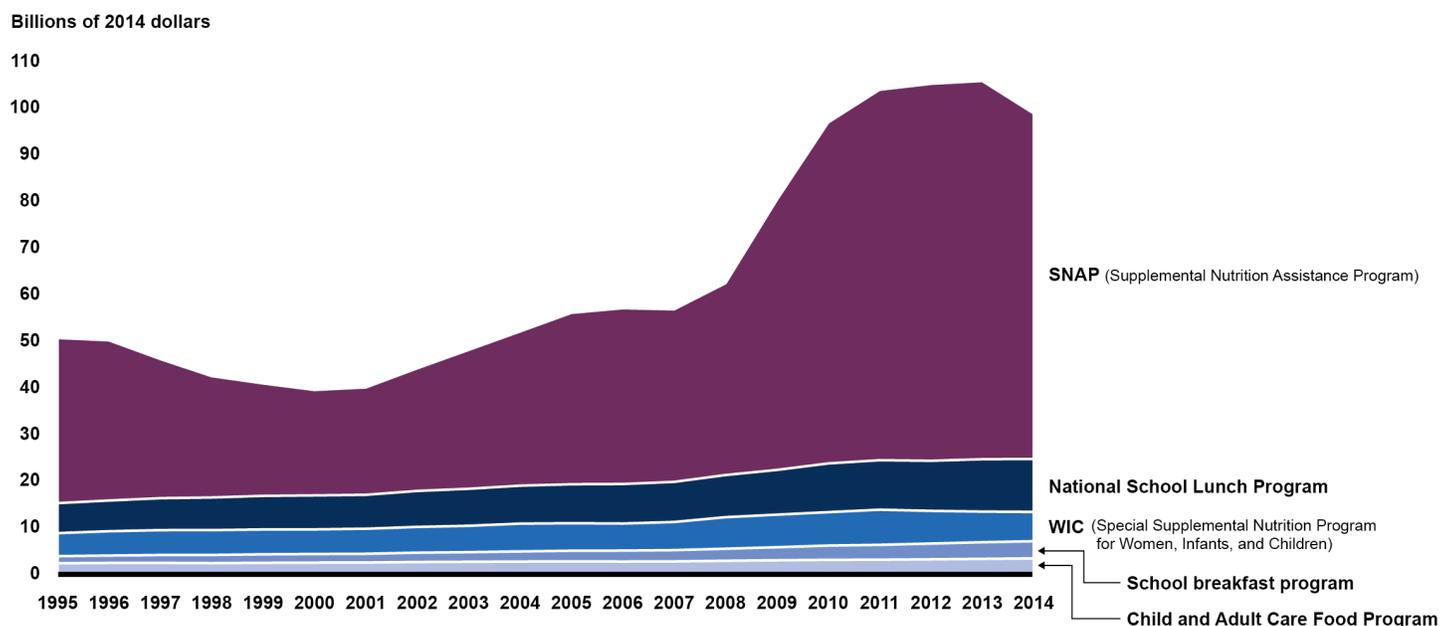


Source: GAO analysis of fiscal year 2016 congressional budget justifications of the relevant agencies. | GAO-15-606T

Federal spending on the food assistance programs has increased by about \$40 billion since we issued our 2010 report, primarily due to increased spending on SNAP. Figure 2 shows federal spending on the five largest food assistance programs over the last 20 years. Spending on SNAP increased substantially following the recession of 2007-2009. Between fiscal year 2007 and fiscal year 2013, federal spending on

SNAP more than doubled, due primarily to increased program participation following the recession. Over this time period, the number of SNAP participants almost doubled from about 26 million to 48 million. In addition, part of the growth in spending can be attributed to temporarily higher benefit amounts established by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (Recovery Act).<sup>2</sup> Spending on SNAP recently declined by about 9 percent from fiscal year 2013 to fiscal year 2014 as the number of participants decreased and the temporary increase in benefits expired.

**Figure 2: Federal Spending on the Five Largest Food Assistance Programs from Fiscal Year 1995 to 2014, Adjusted to 2014 Dollars**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data on program costs. | GAO-15-606T

<sup>2</sup> Pub. L. No. 111-5, 123 Stat. 115. The Recovery Act provided more than \$21 billion for food assistance programs. These funds included a USDA estimated \$20.1 billion for SNAP, in the form of increased benefits and state administrative expenses; \$500 million for WIC; \$100 million for equipment assistance for child nutrition programs; \$150 million for The Emergency Food Assistance Program; \$100 million for the Emergency Food and Shelter National Board Program; and \$100 million for the Elderly Nutrition Program and Grants to American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Organizations for Nutrition and Supportive Services.

Federal food assistance programs provide different types of food benefits to address a variety of needs through a decentralized service delivery structure of federal, state, and local agencies and nonprofit organizations. In our 2010 report, we identified 18 food assistance programs administered by three federal agencies. Fifteen of the programs are administered by USDA, one program is administered by the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Federal Emergency Management Agency, and two programs are administered by the Health and Human Services' (HHS) Administration on Aging (see table 2).

**Table 2: Selected Federal Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs, by Agency**

Program	Target population	Benefit type	Participation (approx.) <sup>a</sup>
<b>USDA</b>			
Child and Adult Care Food Program	Children in certain nonresidential child care centers, family, or group day care; children in after school programs in low-income areas, or residing in emergency shelters; and chronically impaired disabled adults and persons 60 years or older in adult day care centers.	Reimburse local providers (child care centers, adult day care centers, etc.) for meals and snacks served.	An average of 3.6 million children and adults were served daily in fiscal year 2014.
Commodity Supplemental Food Program	Low-income persons 60 years or older. Low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, children up to age 6 who were receiving benefits as of February 6, 2014 can continue to receive assistance until they are no longer eligible.	Supplemental foods, in the form of USDA commodities, are provided in food packages to individuals.	An average of 573,703 people were served monthly in fiscal year 2014, including 9,996 women, infants, and children, and 563,707 elderly participants.
Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program	Low-income individuals in participating communities.	Matching grants made to organizations to plan and implement projects to improve access of low-income community members to food/nutrition, increase the self-reliance of communities in providing for their own needs, and promote comprehensive responses to local food, farm, and nutrition issues.	26 projects were funded in fiscal year 2013.
Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations	American Indian and non-Indian households that reside on a reservation and Indian households living in an otherwise designated area, and recognized as having inadequate income and resources.	Food is provided to qualifying households.	An average of 85,400 participants were served monthly in fiscal year 2014.

<b>Program</b>	<b>Target population</b>	<b>Benefit type</b>	<b>Participation (approx.)<sup>a</sup></b>
Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program	Elementary school children in designated schools with a high percentage of students eligible for free or reduced priced meals.	Reimburse local providers (elementary schools) for fresh fruit and vegetable snacks served free to students outside of breakfast or lunch periods.	Students in more than 7,100 schools during the 2011-2012 school year.
National School Lunch Program	Students from families with incomes below 130 percent of the federal poverty level (or from families receiving SNAP) qualify for free meals, and students from families with incomes below 185 percent of the federal poverty level qualify for reduced price meals.	Cash grants and food donations are provided to reimburse local providers (schools) for meals and snacks served. Schools must agree to serve free and reduced price meals to eligible children.	An average of 30.3 million students were served daily in fiscal year 2014.
Nutrition Assistance for Puerto Rico	Needy persons residing in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.	Benefits provided to households or individuals for food purchase through an electronic benefit transfer.	An average 1.35 million individuals were served monthly in fiscal year 2014.
School Breakfast Program	Eligible children in schools and residential child care institutions. Children whose families meet income eligibility guidelines qualify for free or reduced price breakfasts.	Reimburse local providers (schools and residential child care institutions) for breakfasts served.	An average of 13.5 million students were served daily in fiscal year 2014.
Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program	Low-income seniors.	Benefits can be used to purchase fresh fruits, vegetables, and herbs at authorized farmers' markets, roadside stands, and community supported agriculture programs.	835,795 low-income seniors were served in fiscal year 2013.
Special Milk Program	Children in schools, high school grade or under, childcare institutions, and similar nonprofit institutions that do not participate in other federal meal service programs, including the National School Lunch or School Breakfast Programs.	Formula grant, reimbursing cost of milk for children in schools, camps, and other programs that do not participate in other child nutrition programs.	3,868 schools, non-residential child care institutions, and summer camps participated and 49.9 million half-pints were served in fiscal year 2014.
Summer Food Service Program	Children from needy areas during summer break or when schools are closed for vacation.	Reimburse local providers (schools, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations) for meals and snacks served in programs during breaks in school year.	During July 2014, 2.63 million children participated on an average day.
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	Low-income households with gross income at or below 130 percent of federal poverty level or net income at or below 100 percent of the poverty level and with limited resources.	Benefits provided to households through electronic debit card for food purchase in participating retail stores.	An average of 46.3 million people were served monthly in fiscal year 2014.

<b>Program</b>	<b>Target population</b>	<b>Benefit type</b>	<b>Participation (approx.)<sup>a</sup></b>
The Emergency Food Assistance Program	Needy individuals, such as those who may be homeless or participate in welfare programs.	Commodity foods are distributed through state agencies to food banks and other agencies, which provide food to local organizations, such as soup kitchens and food pantries, or directly provide the foods to needy households.	USDA entitlement and bonus commodity foods valued at over \$566 million delivered to states for distribution in fiscal year 2014.
Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)	Low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women, infants, and children to age 5 determined to be at nutritional risk.	Check, voucher, or electronic benefit transfer benefits provided to recipients pay for supplemental foods, and provide nutrition education and health care referrals for participants. Some state agencies distribute WIC foods directly to recipients through warehouses or home delivery.	An average of 8.3 million women, infants, and children were served monthly in fiscal year 2014.
WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program	WIC participants and those on a waiting list to receive WIC benefits (lower-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women, infants, and children to age 5, who are at nutritional risk).	Coupons provided for purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables at certified farmers markets.	An average of 1.6 million women, infants, and children were served in fiscal year 2013.
<b>DHS Federal Emergency Management Agency</b>			
Emergency Food and Shelter National Board Program	Families and individuals in need of assistance.	Funds provided to private and independent nonprofit or public organizations (such as community action agencies, food banks, and food pantries) to provide emergency food and shelter to families and individuals in need of assistance.	More than 52 million meals were provided in fiscal year 2014
<b>HHS Administration on Aging</b>			
Elderly Nutrition Program: Home-Delivered and Congregate Nutrition Services	Individuals 60 years of age and older and their spouses, especially those with the greatest social or economic need, and in certain cases, under age 60 if the individual is disabled and accompanies an older individual to meals. Special focus is given to those with greatest economic or social need, including low-income minorities and those residing in rural areas.	Supports the provision of nutritious meals (with education and other services) served in a congregate setting or delivered to the home, if individual is homebound.	More than 830,000 individuals received home-delivered meals and 1.6 million seniors received congregate meals in fiscal year 2013.
Grants to American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian organizations for nutrition and supportive services	American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians who are at least 60 years old and their spouses (or those designated as "older Indian" by tribal authorities).	Grants are provided to tribal organizations to fund services including nutrition and supportive services, similar to those in the Elderly Nutrition Program: Home-Delivered and Congregate Nutrition Services.	25,192 American Indian elders received home-delivered meals and 52,137 received congregate meals in fiscal year 2013.

Source: GAO review of agency documents. | GAO-15-606T

<sup>a</sup>Participation information varies by program because some programs provide benefits to individuals while others provide a service or meal.

In 2010, research that we reviewed suggested that participation in seven of the programs, including four of the five largest—WIC, the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, and SNAP—was associated with positive health and nutrition outcomes. These outcomes are consistent with most of these programs’ goals, including raising the level of nutrition among low-income households, safeguarding the health and well-being of the nation’s children, improving the health of Americans, and strengthening the agricultural economy. Table 3 summarizes selected goals of these seven programs. In our 2010 report, we found that little was known about the effectiveness of the remaining 11 programs because they had not been well-studied.

**Table 3: Summary of Selected Program Goals for Seven Food Assistance Programs**

Program	Summary of selected program goals <sup>a</sup>
WIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve the mental and physical health of low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, and young children.</li> <li>• Prevent the occurrence of health problems, including drug abuse, and improve the health status of the target population.</li> <li>• Provide supplemental foods and nutrition education to target population.</li> </ul>
National School Lunch Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safeguard the health and well-being of the nation’s children.</li> <li>• Encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other foods.</li> </ul>
School Breakfast Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safeguard the health and well-being of the nation’s children.</li> <li>• Encourage the domestic consumption of agricultural and other foods by assisting states to more effectively meet the nutritional needs of children.</li> <li>• Assist the states and the Department of Defense to initiate, maintain, or expand nonprofit breakfast programs in all schools that apply for assistance and agree to carry out a nonprofit breakfast program.</li> </ul>
SNAP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raise the level of nutrition among low-income households.</li> <li>• Alleviate hunger and malnutrition in low-income households.</li> <li>• Increase food purchasing power for eligible households.</li> <li>• Strengthen the U.S. agricultural sector.</li> <li>• Encourage more orderly marketing and distribution of food.</li> <li>• Permit low-income households to obtain a more nutritious diet through normal channels of trade.</li> </ul>
Elderly Nutrition Program: Home-Delivered and Congregate Nutrition Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce hunger and food insecurity.</li> <li>• Promote socialization of older individuals.</li> <li>• Promote the health and well-being of older individuals by assisting such individuals to gain access to nutrition and other disease prevention and health promotion services to delay the onset of adverse health conditions resulting from poor nutritional health or sedentary behavior.</li> </ul>
Nutrition Assistance for Puerto Rico	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fund nutrition assistance programs for needy people in Puerto Rico.</li> </ul>

Program	Summary of selected program goals <sup>a</sup>
Special Milk Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="386 464 1458 516">• Encourage consumption of fluid milk by U.S. children in nonprofit schools, high school grade and under, that don't participate in federal meal service programs.</li> <li data-bbox="386 527 1500 600">• Encourage consumption of fluid milk by U.S. children in nonprofit institutions devoted to the care and training of children, such as nursery schools and child care centers, that don't participate in federal meal service programs.</li> <li data-bbox="386 611 1068 638">• Safeguard the health and well-being of the nation's children.</li> <li data-bbox="386 648 1450 697">• Encourage the domestic consumption of agricultural and other foods by assisting states to more effectively meet the nutritional needs of children.</li> </ul>

Source: GAO review of relevant federal laws and discussions with agency officials. | GAO-15-606T

<sup>a</sup>Each federal food and nutrition assistance program has its own set of program goals that were generally established in legislation. Program goals were compiled based on our review of federal statutes or discussions with agency officials. Program goals were not always formally identified as program goals in the statutes, and in those cases we analyzed language from the statutes that we determined closely approximated program goals. While we determined that this list of program goals was sufficient for purposes of this report, we do not consider it a comprehensive list of all of the applicable goals for each program.

## The System of Multiple Programs and Agencies That Provide Food Assistance Can Result in Overlap and Inefficiency

As we reported in 2010, federal food assistance is provided through a decentralized system that involves multiple federal, state, and local providers. Three federal agencies, numerous state government agencies, as well as many different types of local providers—including county government agencies and private nonprofit organizations—play a role in providing federal food assistance through the 18 programs we reviewed. This decentralized network of programs emerged piecemeal over many decades to address a variety of targeted needs. For example, WIC dates back to the 1960s when a White House Conference recommended that special attention be given to the nutritional needs of low-income pregnant women and preschool children. The Emergency Food Assistance Program was created to utilize excess federal food inventories and assist states with storage costs while helping the needy, and the Emergency Food and Shelter National Board Program was established to provide assistance to the homeless.

During our 2010 review, agency officials and local providers told us that the multiple food assistance programs help to increase access to food for vulnerable populations. Specifically, some officials and providers told us that the diversity of food assistance programs can help ensure that individuals in need of assistance have access to at least one program. For example, some individuals may prefer to pick up a bag of groceries from a food bank rather than complete the application process to receive SNAP benefits. Individuals in rural areas may find it easier to receive food assistance through commodities from the Commodity Supplemental Food Program or other programs, as a lack of local grocery stores can make it

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difficult to use SNAP benefits. In addition, the availability of multiple programs within a community can also increase the likelihood that eligible individuals seeking benefits from one program will be referred to other appropriate programs.

However, the federal food assistance structure—with its 18 programs—shows signs of program overlap, which can create unnecessary work and waste administrative resources, resulting in inefficiency. We found that some food assistance programs provide comparable benefits to a similar population, but are managed separately, which could be a potentially inefficient use of federal funds. Specifically, we found that:

- Six programs—the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, the Summer Food Service Program, the Special Milk Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program—all provide food to eligible children in settings outside the home, such as at school, day care, or summer day camps.
- The Commodity Supplemental Food Program and the Elderly Nutrition Program target older Americans.
- Individuals eligible for groceries through the Commodity Supplemental Food Program are generally eligible for groceries through the Emergency Food Assistance Program and for SNAP.
- The Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Emergency Food and Shelter National Board Program and USDA’s Emergency Food Assistance Program both provide groceries and prepared meals to needy individuals through local government and nonprofit entities.
- The Summer Food Service Program is similar to the Summer Seamless Option of the National School Lunch Program.

We have previously concluded that program overlap—having multiple programs provide comparable benefits to similar target populations—is an inefficient use of federal funds.<sup>3</sup> Like other social service programs, most food assistance programs have specific and often complex administrative procedures that federal, state, and local organizations follow to help manage each program’s resources and provide assistance. Government agencies and local organizations dedicate staff time and resources to separately manage the programs even when a number of the programs are providing comparable benefits to similar groups and could potentially

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<sup>3</sup>[GAO/HEHS-95-139](#).

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be consolidated. Previous GAO work indicates that combining programs could reduce administrative expenses by eliminating duplicative efforts, such as eligibility determination and data reporting.<sup>4</sup> Such actions could improve efficiency and save administrative dollars, but could also make it more difficult to achieve the goals of targeting service to specific populations.

In 2010, we recommended the Secretary of Agriculture identify and develop methods for addressing potential inefficiencies among food assistance programs and reducing unnecessary overlap among the smaller programs while ensuring that those who are eligible receive the assistance they need. More recently, the USDA Office of Inspector General determined that USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), which administers USDA's domestic food assistance programs, could potentially achieve cost savings by taking actions to eliminate duplication and overlap in its nutrition assistance programs.<sup>5</sup> The Office of Inspector General recommended that FNS document the requirements for conducting a study to determine the extent of overlap and duplication in its programs and determine whether additional funding is necessary to complete this work.

USDA partially addressed our recommendation by commissioning a study in 2013 on the feasibility and potential cost to assess the extent of overlap and duplication among all nutrition assistance programs administered by USDA. This study concluded that collecting information specifically targeting overlaps with smaller programs would not be cost-effective. As a result, USDA decided to focus on the nutritional impacts of overlap among the six largest programs: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the National School Lunch Program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, the School Breakfast Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the Summer Food Service Program. The research proposed in the feasibility study will examine the impact of participation in multiple food assistance programs on the nutritional status of participants. While we agree such a study will

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<sup>4</sup> See GAO, *Food Assistance: USDA's Multiprogram Approach*, [GAO/RCED-94-33](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 24, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see: USDA Office of Inspector General, *Overlap and Duplication in Food and Nutrition Service's Nutrition Programs*, Audit Report 27001-0001-10 (June 2013).

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provide important information, it does not address our recommendation. We believe that further action is needed to identify cost-effective approaches to address potential inefficiencies and unnecessary overlap among domestic food assistance programs. For example, we continue to believe that it would be beneficial for USDA to convene a group of experts (consistent with the Federal Advisory Committee Act) that includes representatives of the food assistance programs, state representatives, and local providers to discuss potential inefficiencies and overlap among the programs and develop proposals to address them. We believe that over time, such an effort could achieve cost savings.

In conclusion, the federal government spends billions of dollars every year to support a food assistance structure that benefits millions of Americans, but there are signs of potential overlap and inefficiency among its programs. While research indicates that the largest programs have positive outcomes consistent with their program goals, limited research on most of the smaller programs makes it difficult to determine whether these are filling an important gap or whether they are unnecessarily duplicating functions and services of other programs. To ensure the most efficient use of resources, it will be important for federal agencies to explore cost-effective approaches for addressing potential inefficiencies and unnecessary overlap and duplication among all of the nation's food assistance programs.

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Chairwoman Walorski, Ranking Member McGovern, and Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

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## GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgements

If you or your staff have any questions about this testimony, please contact me at (202) 512-7215 or [brownke@gao.gov](mailto:brownke@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. GAO staff who made key contributions to this testimony include Kathy Larin, Assistant Director; James Bennett, Julianne Hartman Cutts, Andrea Dawson, Alex Galuten, Kirsten Lauber, Rhiannon Patterson, Cathy Roark, and Kate van Gelder.

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Automated answering system: (800) 424-5454 or (202) 512-7470

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## Congressional Relations

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## Public Affairs

Chuck Young, Managing Director, [youngc1@gao.gov](mailto:youngc1@gao.gov), (202) 512-4800 U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7149 Washington, DC 20548

