



Highlights of [GAO-10-346](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government spends billions of dollars every year on domestic food assistance programs. The U.S. Department of Agriculture administers most of these programs and monitors the prevalence of food insecurity—that is, the percentage of U.S. households that were unable to afford enough food sometime during the year. Other federal agencies also fund food assistance programs; however, comprehensive and consolidated information on the multiple programs is not readily available. Congress asked GAO to examine: 1) the prevalence of food insecurity in the United States, 2) spending on food assistance programs, 3) what is known about the effectiveness of these programs in meeting program goals, and 4) the implications of providing food assistance through multiple programs and agencies. GAO's steps included analyzing food security and program spending data, analyzing studies on program effectiveness, analyzing relevant federal laws and regulations, conducting site visits, and interviewing relevant experts and officials.

## What GAO Recommends

We recommend that the Secretary of Agriculture identify and develop methods for addressing potential inefficiencies and reducing unnecessary overlap among smaller programs while ensuring access to the programs for those who are eligible. USDA agreed to consider the value of examining potential inefficiencies and overlap among smaller programs.

View [GAO-10-346](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Kay E. Brown at (202) 512-7215 or [brownke@gao.gov](mailto:brownke@gao.gov).

## DOMESTIC FOOD ASSISTANCE

### Complex System Benefits Millions, but Additional Efforts Could Address Potential Inefficiency and Overlap among Smaller Programs

#### What GAO Found

The prevalence of food insecurity hovered between 10 and 12 percent over the past decade until it rose to nearly 15 percent (or about 17 million households) in 2008. Households with incomes below the poverty line, households headed by single parents, minority households, and those with children had higher than average rates of food insecurity. These households were more likely to report, for example, that they had been hungry, but didn't eat, because there wasn't enough money for food. While some households were able to protect children from the effects of food insecurity, many could not. In more than 4.3 million households, children—as well as adults—were affected by food insecurity sometime during the year.

The federal government spent more than \$62.5 billion on 18 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs in fiscal year 2008. The five largest food assistance programs—Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the National School Lunch Program; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); the Child and Adult Care Food Program; and the School Breakfast Program—accounted for 95 percent of total spending on the 18 programs. Since 1995 SNAP spending has fluctuated while spending on the other large programs has remained relatively stable. Economic conditions—such as unemployment or poverty—and other factors can affect spending on some programs, particularly SNAP.

Research suggests that participation in 7 of the programs we reviewed—including WIC, the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, and SNAP—is associated with positive health and nutrition outcomes consistent with programs' goals, such as raising the level of nutrition among low-income households, safeguarding the health and wellbeing of the nation's children, and strengthening the agricultural economy. However, little is known about the effectiveness of the remaining 11 programs because they have not been well studied.

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 emerged piecemeal over the past several decades to meet various needs. Agency officials and local providers told us that the multiple food assistance programs help to increase access to food for vulnerable or target populations. However, the 18 food assistance programs show signs of program overlap, which can create unnecessary work and lead to inefficient use of resources. For example, some of the programs provide comparable benefits to similar target populations. Further, overlapping eligibility requirements create duplicative work for both service providers and applicants. Consolidating programs, however, entails difficult trade-offs. 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, such as pregnant women, children, and the elderly.