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United States Department of Agriculture

Economic Research Service

Economic Information Bulletin Number 150

March 2016

The Food Assistance Landscape

FY 2015 Annual Report

Victor Oliveira

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) domestic food and nutrition assistance programs affect the lives of millions of Americans each day. About 1 in 4 Americans participates in 1 or more of 15 USDA food and nutrition assistance programs at some point during the year. Accounting for over two-thirds of USDA's annual budget, these programs represent a significant Federal investment.

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The Food Assistance Landscape

FY 2015 Annual Report

Victor Oliveira

Abstract

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers 15 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs that together affect the lives of millions of people. At some point during the year, about one in four Americans participates in at least one of these programs. Accounting for $104.1 billion, or over two-thirds of USDA's annual budget, these programs also represent a significant Federal investment. This report uses preliminary data from USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to examine trends in U.S. food and nutrition assistance programs through fiscal 2015 (October 1, 2014 to September 30, 2015) and ERS data to examine trends in the prevalence and severity of household food insecurity in the United States through 2014. The report also summarizes two other recent ERS reports that examined food access-related issues for vulnerable population groups.

Keywords: Food and nutrition assistance programs; Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); National School Lunch Program; School Breakfast Program; Child and Adult Care Food Program; food security; economic conditions

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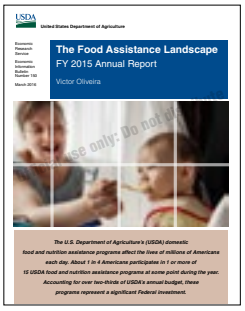
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The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) domestic food and nutrition assistance programs affect the lives of millions of Americans each day. About 1 in 4 Americans participates in 1 or more of 15 USDA food and nutrition assistance programs at some point during the year. Accounting for over two-thirds of USDA's annual budget, these programs represent a significant Federal investment.

Find the full report at *www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib-economic-information-bulletin/eib150*

The Food Assistance Landscape
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What Is the Issue?

At some point during the year, about 1 in 4 Americans participates in 1 or more of 15 domestic food and nutrition programs that provide children and needy families better access to food and a more healthful diet. These programs also represent a significant Federal investment, accounting for over two-thirds of USDA's annual budget. This report uses preliminary data from USDA's Food and Nutrition Service to examine trends in food and nutrition assistance programs through fiscal 2015 and ERS data to examine trends in the prevalence and severity of household food insecurity in the United States through 2014.

What Did the Study Find?

Spending for USDA's 15 domestic food and nutrition programs totaled $104.1 billion in fiscal 2015, or about the same as the previous fiscal year. This was about 5 percent lower than the historical high of $109.2 billion set in FY 2013.

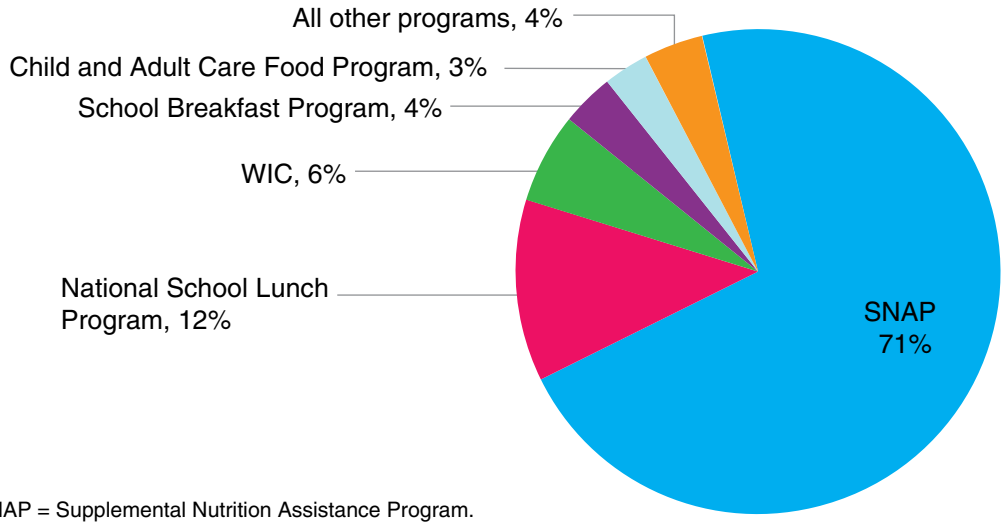
- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—formerly the Food Stamp Program—accounted for 71 percent of all Federal food and nutrition assistance spending in fiscal 2015. An average 45.8 million persons per month participated in the program, or 2 percent fewer than the previous year. FY 2015 marked the second consecutive year that participation decreased, and only the third time in the last 15 years.
- An average 8.0 million people per month participated in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) in fiscal 2015, or 3 percent less than the previous year. This was the 5th consecutive year that participation fell.
- Daily participation in the National School Lunch Program averaged 30.5 million in FY 2015 or about the same as the previous year. Sixty-five percent of all participants received free meals, 7 percent received reduced-price meals, and 28 percent paid full price.
- An average of 14.0 million children participated in the School Breakfast Program each school day, or 3 percent more than the previous fiscal year. Seventy-nine percent of all participants received free meals, 6 percent received reduced-price meals, and 15 percent paid full price.
- A total of almost 2 billion meals were served through the Child and Adult Care Food Program, or 2 percent more than in the previous year.

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.

Summary figure 1

Food and nutrition assistance expenditures by program, FY 2015

SNAP accounted for over two-thirds of food and nutrition assistance expenditures



SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.
WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.
Expenditures for all food and nutrition assistance programs totaled $104.1 billion.
Source: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service.

- An estimated 14.0 percent of U.S. households (or 17.4 million households containing 48.1 million people) were food-insecure at least some time in 2014, essentially unchanged from the previous year; however, the cumulative decline from 14.9 percent in 2011 was statistically significant. Sixty-one percent of food-insecure households in the month prior to the survey participated in one or more of the three largest food and nutrition assistance programs (i.e., SNAP, National School Lunch Program, or WIC).

How Was the Study Conducted?

In this report, the Economic Research Service uses preliminary data from USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)—the agency responsible for managing the food and nutrition assistance programs—to examine trends in these programs through fiscal 2015 (October 1, 2014 to September 30, 2015). The report also highlights a recent ERS report that examines trends in the prevalence and severity of household food insecurity in the United States through 2014 and summarizes two other recent ERS reports that examined food access-related issues for vulnerable population groups.

The Food Assistance Landscape
FY 2015 Annual Report

Victor Oliveira

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) operates 15 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs that serve about 1 in 4 Americans at some point during the year. Together these programs, which vary by target population, number of participants, cost, and type of benefits provided, comprise a nutritional safety net for millions of children and low-income people. These programs account for over two-thirds of USDA's annual budget. USDA's Economic Research Service conducts studies and evaluations of these programs.

This report uses preliminary administrative data from USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the agency responsible for managing the food and nutrition assistance programs, to examine trends in these programs through fiscal 2015 (October 1, 2014 to September 30, 2015).

The report also highlights a recent ERS report that examines trends in the prevalence and severity of household food insecurity in the United States through 2014 and summarizes two other recent ERS reports that examined food access-related issues for vulnerable population groups. In addition, the report looks at trends in some of the indicators of economic and social conditions that affect participation in and spending on food and nutrition assistance programs.

Total Food Assistance Expenditures Hold Steady

Federal food expenditures for USDA's domestic food and nutrition assistance programs totaled $104.1 billion in fiscal 2015, or about the same as the previous fiscal year (table 1). This was about 5 percent lower than the historical high of $109.2 billion set in FY 2013 (fig. 1). (Note: all references to expenditures in this report refer to nominal—i.e., not adjusted for inflation—Federal expenditures except where specifically noted.)

Table 1
USDA nutrition assistance at a glance

Program		FY 2014	FY 2015	Percent change
SNAP	Average monthly participation (millions)	46.7	45.8	-1.9
	Average benefit per person ($/month)	125.01	126.83	1.5
	Total annual expenditures ($ billions)	74.2	73.9	-0.4
WIC	Average monthly participation (millions)	8.3	8.0	-2.9
	• Women	2.0	1.9	-2.6
	• Infants	2.0	1.9	-1.2
	• Children	4.3	4.2	-3.8
	Food cost per person ($/month)	43.64	43.52	-0.3
	Total expenditures ($ billions)	6.3	6.2	-2.4
National School Lunch Program	Average daily participation (millions)	30.5	30.5	0.1
	• Free	19.2	19.8	3.0
	• Reduced price	2.5	2.2	-10.3
	• Full price	8.8	8.5	-3.4
	Total expenditures ($ billions)	12.7	13.0	2.7
School Breakfast Program	Average daily participation (millions)	13.6	14.0	3.0
	• Free	10.5	11.0	4.7
	• Reduced price	1.0	0.9	-10.6
	• Full price	2.1	2.1	0.7
	Total expenditures ($ billions)	3.7	3.9	5.4
Child and Adult Care Food Program	Meals served in:			
	• Childcare centers (millions)	1,371.3	1,415.5	3.2
	• Family daycare homes (millions)	537.5	525.4	-2.2
	• Adult daycare centers (millions)	71.0	73.4	3.3
	Total expenditures ($ billions)	3.1	3.3	4.9
All programs	Total expenditures ($ billions)	104.0	104.1	0.1

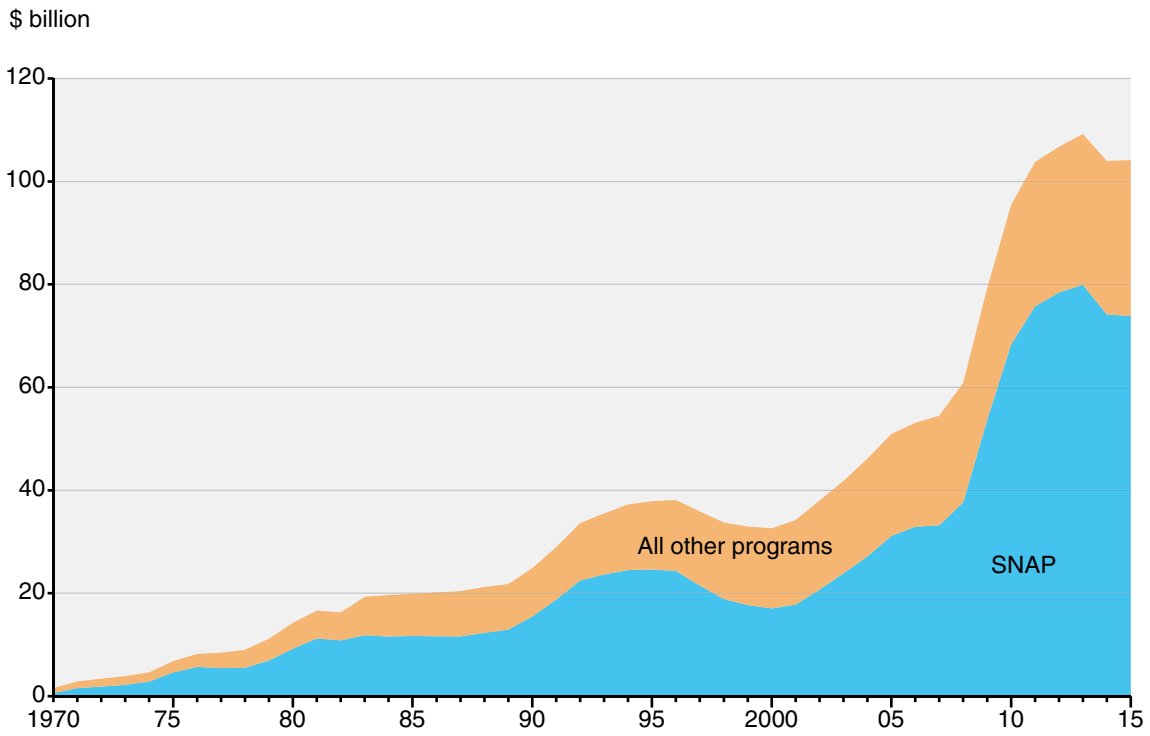
SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

Note: Figures are based on preliminary data provided by USDA, Food and Nutrition Service as of December 2015 and are subject to change. Total program expenditures include figures from other programs not shown in the table.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service.

Figure 1
USDA expenditures for food assistance, fiscal 1970-2015



Note: Expenditures are measured in nominal dollars, i.e., unadjusted for inflation.
SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from USDA, Food and Nutrition Service.

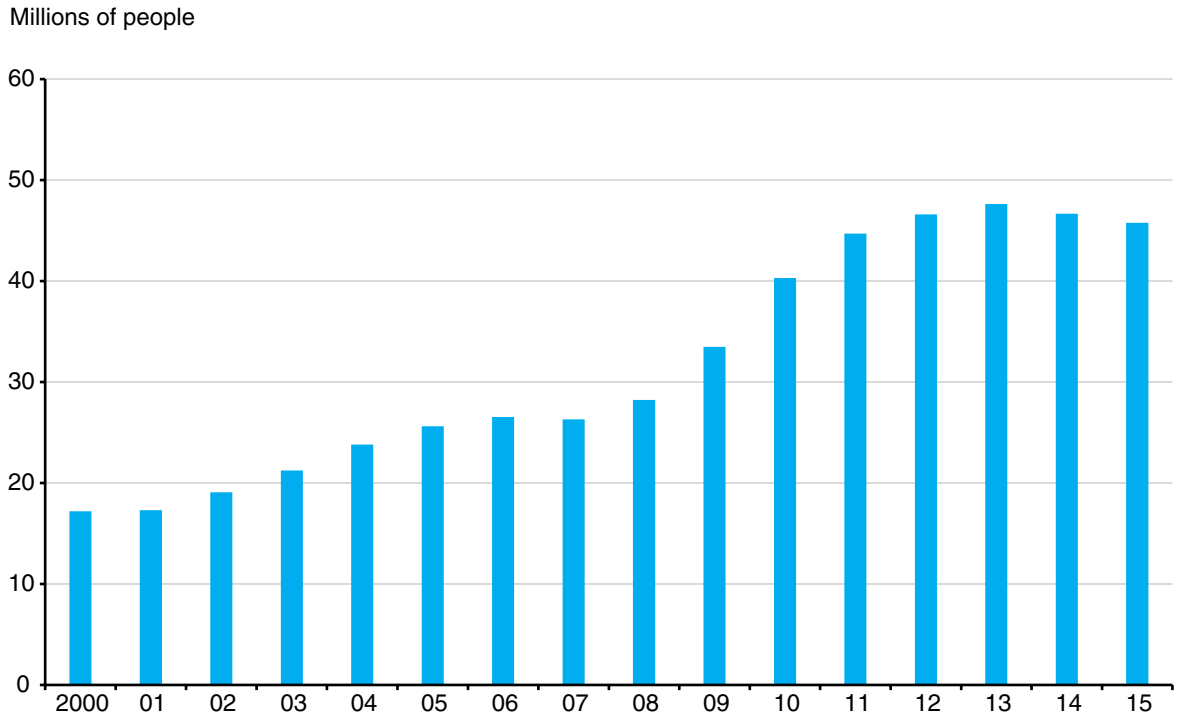
The five largest programs in fiscal 2015—the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the National School Lunch Program; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); the School Breakfast Program; and the Child and Adult Care Food Program—accounted for 96 percent of total USDA expenditures for domestic food and nutrition assistance. Expenditures increased for some of these programs but decreased for others in fiscal 2015.

Participation in SNAP Falls for Second Consecutive Year

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—formerly the Food Stamp Program—is the cornerstone of USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs, accounting for 71 percent of all Federal food and nutrition assistance spending in fiscal 2015. The program provides monthly benefits for eligible participants to purchase food items at authorized food stores. Unlike other food and nutrition assistance programs that target specific groups, SNAP is available to most needy households with limited income and assets (subject to certain work and immigration status requirements). During fiscal 2015:

- An average 45.8 million persons per month participated in the program, or 2 percent fewer than the previous fiscal year (and 4 percent fewer than the historical high of 47.6 million set in FY 2013). FY 2015 marked the second consecutive year that participation decreased, and only the third time in the last 15 years (fig. 2).
- On average, about 14 percent of the Nation's population participated in the program each month.
- Benefits averaged $126.83 per month, or about 1 percent more than the previous fiscal year.
- Reflecting the decrease in participation, Federal spending for SNAP totaled $73.9 billion, or slightly less than the previous fiscal year.

Figure 2
Average monthly SNAP participation, FY 2000-15
Participation decreases for second consecutive year in FY 2015



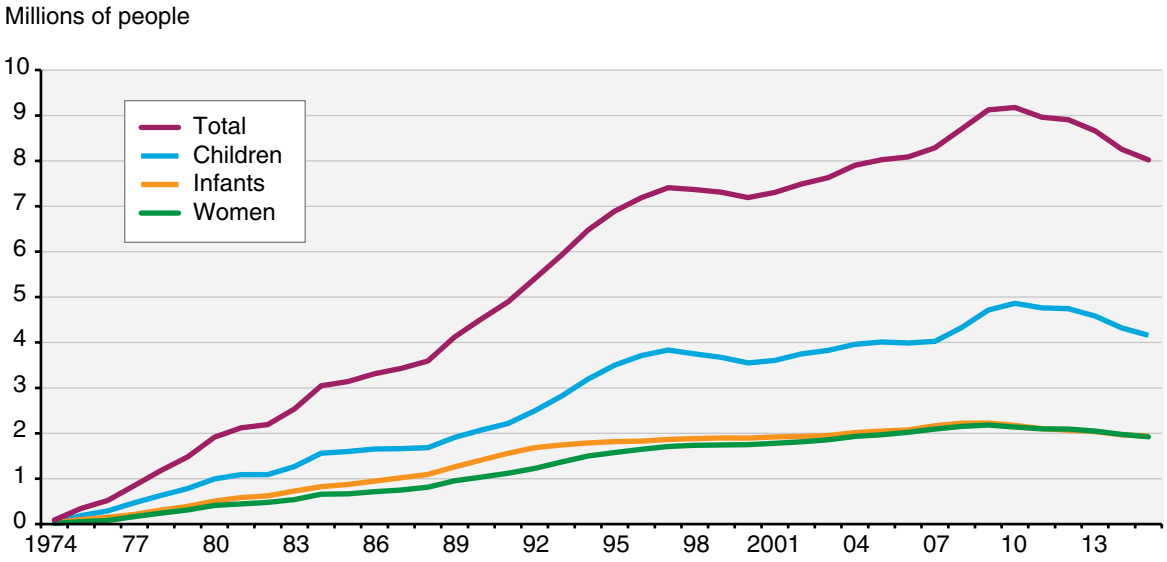
SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.
Source: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service.

WIC Participation Continues To Fall

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) helps safeguard the health of low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women as well as infants and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk by providing a package of supplemental foods, nutrition education, and health care referrals at no cost. To be eligible on the basis of income, applicants' income must be at or below 185 percent of the Federal poverty level (a person who participates or who has certain family members who participate in other benefits programs such as SNAP, Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) automatically meets the income eligibility requirement). During fiscal 2015:

- An average 8.0 million people per month participated in the program, or about 3 percent fewer than the previous fiscal year (fig. 3).
- Children made up more than half (52 percent) of all participants, while women and infants each comprised 24 percent.
- The number of children participating in the program fell by 4 percent, the number of women fell by 3 percent, and the number of infants fell by 1 percent. This marked the fifth consecutive fiscal year—and only the fifth year in the program's history—that participation for all three groups fell.
- Food costs averaged $43.52 per month, about the same as the previous fiscal year.
- Spending on the program totaled $6.2 billion, or 2 percent less than the previous fiscal year. This was the fourth consecutive year spending decreased.

Figure 3
Average monthly WIC participation, FY 1974-2015
Participation for each of the three participant groups fell for the fifth consecutive year in FY 2015



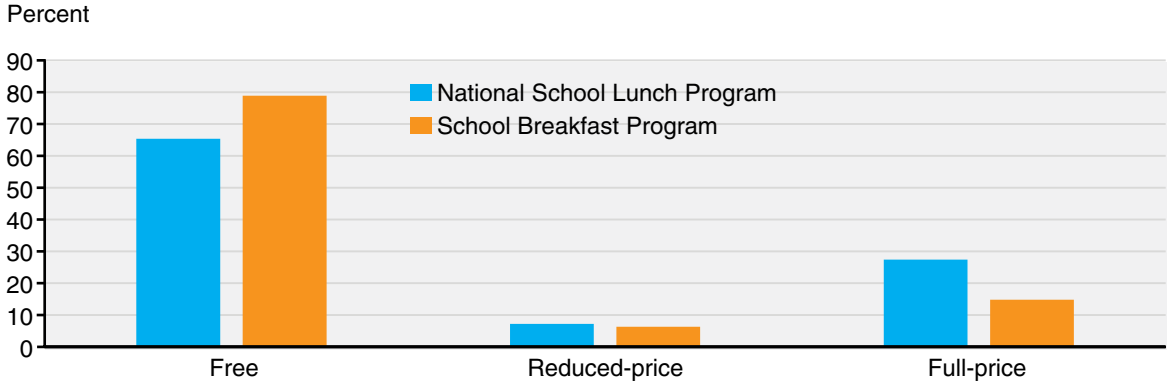
WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.
Source: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service.

Participation in National School Lunch Program Stabilizes

The National School Lunch Program provides nutritious lunches at low or no cost to students during lunch periods at school and snacks to children participating in after-school care programs. Schools that participate in the program receive cash and some commodities from USDA to offset the cost of providing food. In return, the schools must serve lunches that meet Federal nutrition requirements and offer free or reduced-price lunches to needy children. Any child at a participating school may enroll in the program. Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty guidelines are eligible for free meals, and those from families with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty guidelines are eligible for reduced-price meals. Children from families with incomes over 185 percent of the poverty guidelines pay full price, although their meals are still subsidized to a small extent. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), a provision from the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, allows schools and local educational agencies with high poverty rates to provide breakfast and lunch at no cost to the students. CEP eliminates the burden of collecting household applications to determine eligibility for school meals, relying instead on information from other means-tested programs such as SNAP. During fiscal 2015:

- An average 30.5 million children participated in the program each school day, or about the same as in the previous fiscal year. Participation had decreased in each of the previous 3 fiscal years.
- The share of participants who received free meals increased from 63 percent in fiscal 2014 to 65 percent in fiscal 2015 while the share of participants who paid full price fell from 29 percent to 28 percent and the share of participants who received reduced-price meals fell from 8 percent to 7 percent (fig. 4). The share of meals that were free or reduced-price has increased in each of the last 8 years and in 12 of the last 14 years.
- Spending for the program totaled $13 billion or 3 percent more than in the previous fiscal year. This increase in expenditures reflected, at least in part, the percentage increase in free meals (which are more heavily subsidized) served in the program. Also, an increase in the maximum Federal reimbursement rates for school lunches (and breakfasts) in school year 2014-15 reflects an increase in the Consumer Price Index for food away from home.

Figure 4
Share of school meals served by type of reimbursement, FY 2015
Most school meals are served free to students



Source: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service.

School Breakfast Program Continues To Expand

The School Breakfast Program provides low-cost breakfasts to schoolchildren, with students from low-income families receiving free or reduced-price meals (eligibility requirements are the same as those for the National School Lunch Program). Schools that participate in the program receive cash from USDA to offset the cost of providing food. Participating schools receive higher "severe need" reimbursements when 40 percent or more of their lunches were served free or at a reduced price during the second preceding school year. During fiscal 2015:

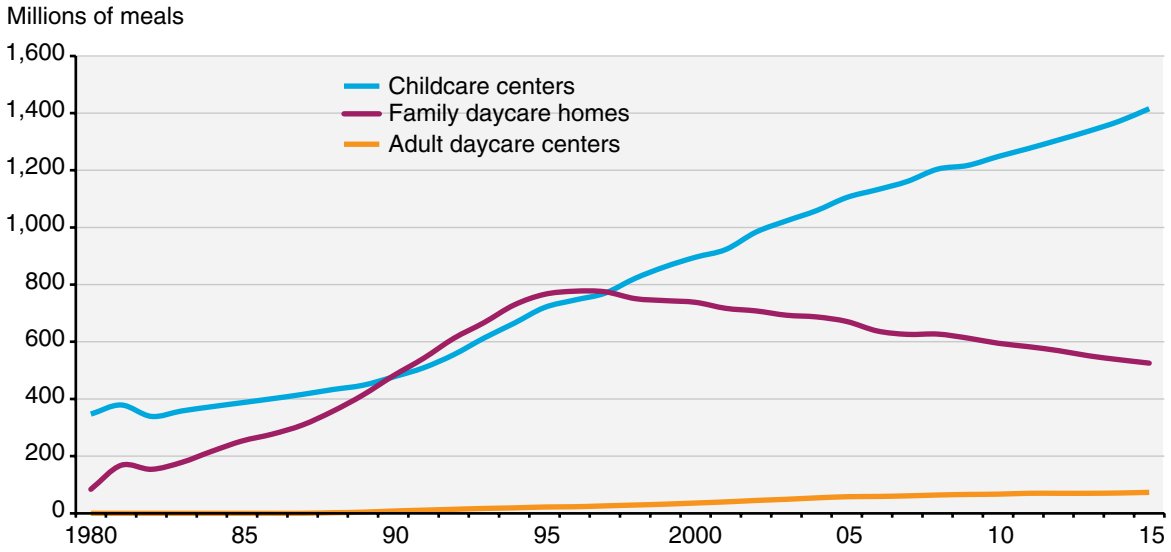
- An average of 14 million children participated in the program each school day or 3 percent more than the previous fiscal year. This is a continuation of a long-term trend: participation in the program has increased each year since it was permanently authorized in 1975.
- The share of participants who received free meals increased from 77 percent in fiscal 2014 to 79 percent in fiscal 2015 while the share of participants who received reduced-price meals fell from 7 percent to 6 percent. The share of participants who paid full price remained about the same at 15 percent (fig. 4).
- Spending totaled $3.9 billion, or 5 percent more than in the previous year, making it the fastest growing of all the major food assistance programs in terms of expenditures.

The Child and Adult Care Food Program Grows

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) subsidizes healthy meals and snacks in participating childcare centers, daycare homes, and adult daycare facilities. Care providers are reimbursed for each type of qualifying meal (breakfast, lunch/supper, or snack) they serve. In addition to cash reimbursement, USDA makes donated agricultural foods or cash (in lieu of donated foods) available to institutions participating in CACFP. During fiscal 2015:

- A total of almost 2 billion meals were served or 2 percent more than in the previous fiscal year. Childcare centers accounted for 70 percent of all meals served; family daycare homes, 26 percent; and adult daycare centers, 4 percent (fig. 5).
- The number of meals served increased by 3 percent in both childcare centers and adult daycare centers, while the number of meals served in family daycare homes decreased by 2 percent. The decline in the number of meals served in family daycare homes is a continuation of a trend that began in FY 1997.
- Program expenditures totaled $3.3 billion or 5 percent more than in the previous year. This marked the 16th consecutive year that program expenditures increased.

Figure 5
Meals served in the CACFP by type of provider, FY 1980-2015
Childcare centers are responsible for most of meals served in the CACFP



CACFP = Child and Adult Care Food Program.
Source: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service.

Prevalence of Food Insecurity Unchanged

Food security—access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life—is one of several conditions necessary for a population to be healthy and well nourished. Food-insecure households are those that at times were unable to acquire adequate food for one or more household members because they have insufficient money or other resources for food. Food-insecure households are further classified as having either low food security or very low food security. In the more severe range of food insecurity—very low food security—the eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and their food intake reduced, at least some time during the year, because they could not afford enough food.

USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs increase food security by providing low-income households access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education. USDA monitors the prevalence and severity of household food insecurity in the United States through an annual nationally representative food security survey sponsored by ERS. Household food security status is based on responses to a questionnaire about food-insecure conditions experienced by household members in the prior 12 months. Results from the survey are reported in a series of annual reports. The most recent available data are from the December 2014 survey. During 2014:

- An estimated 14.0 percent of U.S. households (or 17.4 million households containing 48.1 million people) were food-insecure at least some time during the year, essentially unchanged from the previous year (table 2 and fig. 6). However, the cumulative decline from 14.9 percent in 2011 was statistically significant.

- A total of 5.6 percent of all households (6.9 million households) had very low food security. On average, households classified as having very low food security experienced the condition in 7 months of the year, for a few days in each of those months.

- Among households with children under age 18, 19.2 percent were food-insecure at some time during 2014. In about half of food-insecure households with children, only adults were food-insecure (9.8 percent of households with children); in the rest (i.e., 9.4 percent of households with children), children were also food-insecure. In 1.1 percent of households with children (422,000 households), food insecurity among children was so severe that caregivers reported that children were hungry, skipped a meal, or did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food.

- Rates of food insecurity were higher than the national average for households with children headed by a single woman (35.3 percent) or a single man (21.7 percent); households headed by Black, non-Hispanics (26.1 percent), and Hispanics (22.4 percent); low-income households with incomes below 185 percent of the poverty threshold (33.7 percent); and households located in nonmetropolitan areas (17.1 percent).

- The typical food-secure household spent 26 percent more for food than the typical food-insecure household of the same size and composition.

- Sixty-one percent of food-insecure households in the month prior to the survey participated in one or more of the three largest food and nutrition assistance programs (i.e., SNAP, National School Lunch Program, or WIC).

Table 2

U.S. food security at a glance

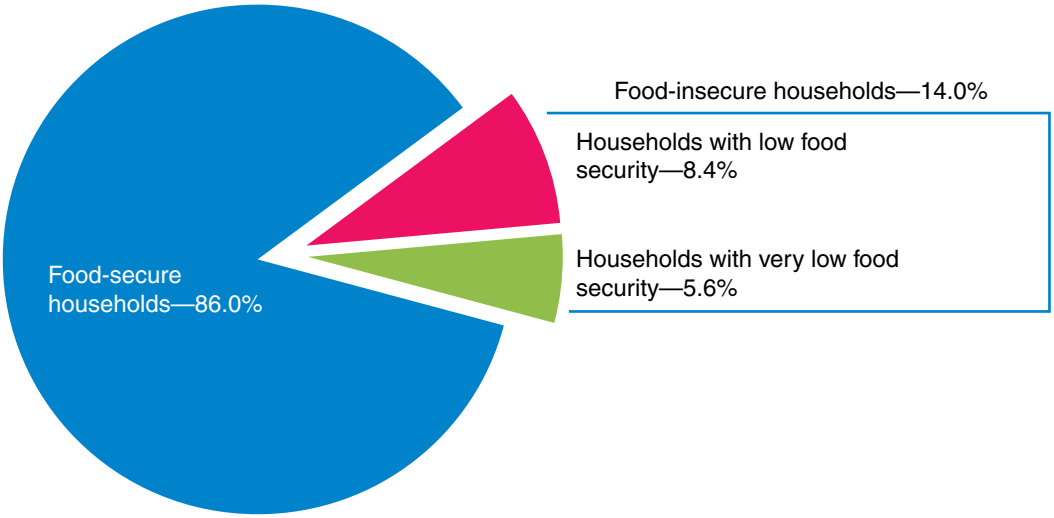
Food security status	2013		2014	
	Thousands	*Percent*	*Thousands*	*Percent*
All households	122,579	100.0	124,044	100.0
• Food-secure households	105,070	85.7	106,618	86.0
• Food-insecure households	17,509	14.3	17,426	14.0
— With low food security	10,664	8.7	10,488	8.4
— With very low food security	6,845	5.6	6,938	5.6
All households with children	38,486	100.0	39,079	100.0
• Food-secure households	30,978	80.5	31,590	80.8
• Food-insecure households	7,508	19.5	7,489	19.2
— With food-insecure children	3,814	9.9	3,665	9.4
— With very low food security among children	360	0.9	422	1.1

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, *Household Food Security in the United States in 2014*, ERR-194, September 2015.

Figure 6

U.S. households by food security status, 2014

An estimated 14.0 percent of U.S. households were food-insecure at least some time in 2014



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, *Household Food Security in the United States in 2014*, ERR-194, September 2015.

Economic and Social Indicators Related to Participation in the Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs

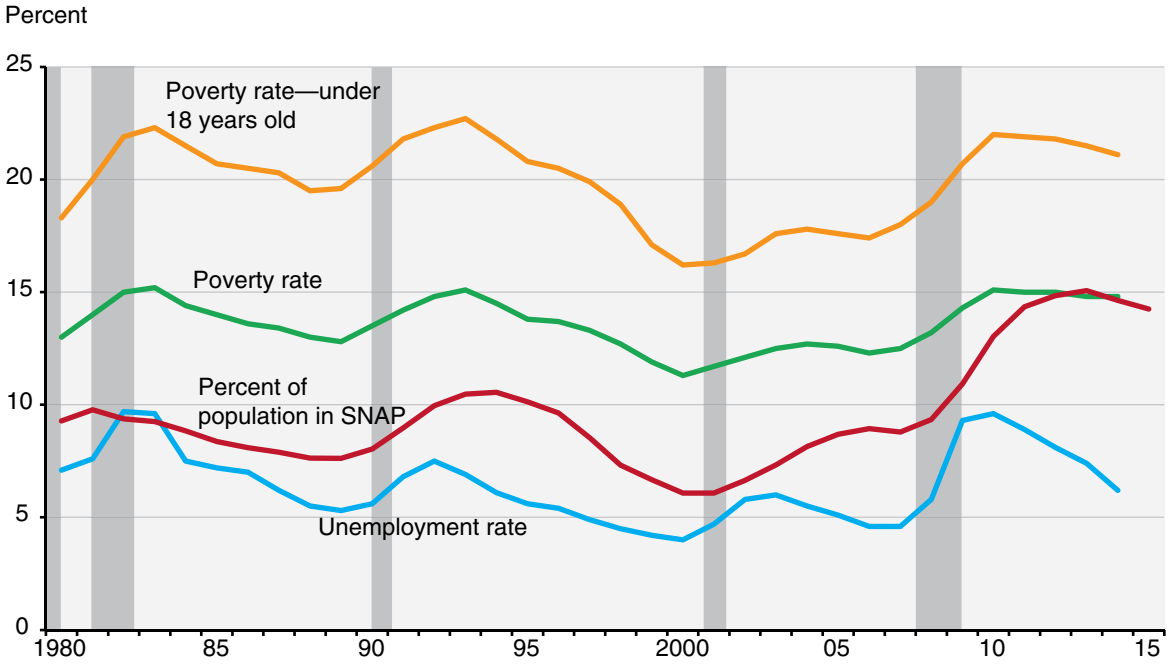
Economic and social conditions affect participation in and spending on food assistance programs by influencing (1) the size of the eligible population, (2) the rate of participation among eligible people, and (3) benefit levels. The extent to which the programs respond to changing economic and social conditions affects the lives of millions of Americans and has Federal budgetary implications.

As means-tested programs, the number of persons eligible for USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs is inherently linked to the economy. In particular, there is a strong association between economic conditions and SNAP caseloads. SNAP is one of the Nation's primary countercyclical programs, expanding during economic downturns and contracting during periods of economic growth.

In general, the percentage of the population in SNAP closely tracks the poverty rate, and to lesser degrees, the unemployment rate, and the poverty rate for children under age 18. In 2015, the unemployment rate decreased for the fifth consecutive year. That same year, the percentage of the population in SNAP decreased for the second consecutive year. This lagged response of SNAP participation to a reduction in the unemployment rate is consistent with historical trends. The improvement of economic conditions during the early stage of recovery takes longer to be felt by less-educated, lower wage workers who are more likely to receive SNAP benefits (fig. 7 and table 3).

Figure 7

Percentage of population in SNAP and selected economic indicators, 1980-2015



Note: Gray vertical bars indicate recession. Recessions: January 1980 to July 1980, July 1981 to November 1982, July 1990 to March 1991, March 2001 to November 2001, December 2007 to June 2009.

SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Source: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service; U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; and U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau.

Table 3
Selected economic and social indicators, 2012-15

Indicator	2012	2013	2014	2015
Population in July (millions)	313.9	316.1	318.9	321.2
Births (thousands)	3,953	3,932	3,986 (PR)	NA
School enrollment (thousands)	54,833 (PJ)	54,842 (PJ)	54,725 (PJ)	54,731 (PJ)
Prekindergarten-grade 8 (thousands)	38,874 (PJ)	38,967 (PJ)	38,839 (PJ)	38,810 (PJ)
Grades 9-12 (thousands)	15,959 (PJ)	15,874 (PJ)	15,886 (PJ)	15,921 (PJ)
Employed persons (thousands)	142,469	143,929	146,305	148,834
Unemployed persons (thousands)	12,506	11,460	9,617	8,296
Unemployment rate (percent)	8.1	7.4	6.2	5.3
Labor force participation rate (percent)	63.7	63.2	62.9	62.7
Persons in poverty (thousands)	46,496	46,269	46,657	NA
Poverty rate (percent)	15.0	14.8	14.8	NA
Children in poverty (thousands)	16,073	15,801	15,540	NA
Poverty rate for children (under age 18)	21.8	21.5	21.1	NA
Median household income (2014 dollars)	52,789	54,462	53,657	NA
CPI for all items (percent change)	2.1	1.5	1.6	0.1
CPI for food (percent change)	2.6	1.4	2.4	1.9
CPI for food at home	2.5	0.9	2.4	1.2
CPI for food away from home	2.8	2.1	2.4	2.9
Real GDP (percent change)	2.2	1.5	2.4	2.4

CPI = Consumer Price Index.
GDP = Gross Domestic Product.
NA = Data not available.
(PR) = Provisional.
(PJ) = Projected.
Population data come from the U.S. Census Bureau.
Birth data come from the National Center for Health Statistics.
School enrollment data come from the National Center for Education Statistics.
Employment, unemployment, and labor force participation data come from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.
Poverty and household income data come from the U.S. Census Bureau.
CPI data come from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.
GDP data come from the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

ERS Research Update

ERS research is conducted internally by ERS staff as well as through a portfolio of ERS-funded extramural research projects and partnerships. ERS has compiled an electronic database of over 1,000 peer-reviewed reports related to domestic food and nutrition assistance (searchable by title, author, year of publication, and topic area): http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-and-nutrition-assistance-research-database/research-reports-articles-database.aspx. Among the ERS research reports released in fiscal 2015, two examined food access-related issues for vulnerable populations.

Where Do Americans Usually Shop for Food and How Do They Travel To Get There? Initial Findings From the National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey, EIB-138, March 2015. Food shopping patterns of food assistance program participants and other low-income households are of great policy interest because there is concern these households may not have enough resources to consume a healthy diet. Travel modes and distances are important because access to healthy and affordable food may depend on proximity to food retailers and whether the household has a vehicle or other means to get to a food retailer. ERS researchers examined the food shopping patterns of households, comparing patterns across SNAP and WIC participation status, income groups, and food security status. The study utilized data from the National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey (FoodAPS). Funded by ERS, FoodAPS is the first survey to collect unique and comprehensive data about food purchases and acquisitions for a nationally representative sample of U.S. households.

The study found that the vast majority of households, 88 percent, use their own vehicle to get to the store where they do their main grocery shopping. However, the percentage of SNAP and food-insecure households who use their own vehicle to get to the grocery store is lower.

- While 95 percent of higher income, non-SNAP households (above 185 percent of the Federal poverty line) use their own vehicle to get to the store where they usually shop for groceries, only 68 percent of SNAP households use their own vehicle. About 19 percent of SNAP households use someone else's car or ride with someone else, compared with 2 percent of higher income households. Another 13 percent of SNAP households walk, bike, or take public transit or a shuttle to the store.

- Eighty-seven percent of WIC participating households use their own vehicle to do their grocery shopping. This is less than the share of higher income, nonparticipating households that use their own vehicle (98 percent).

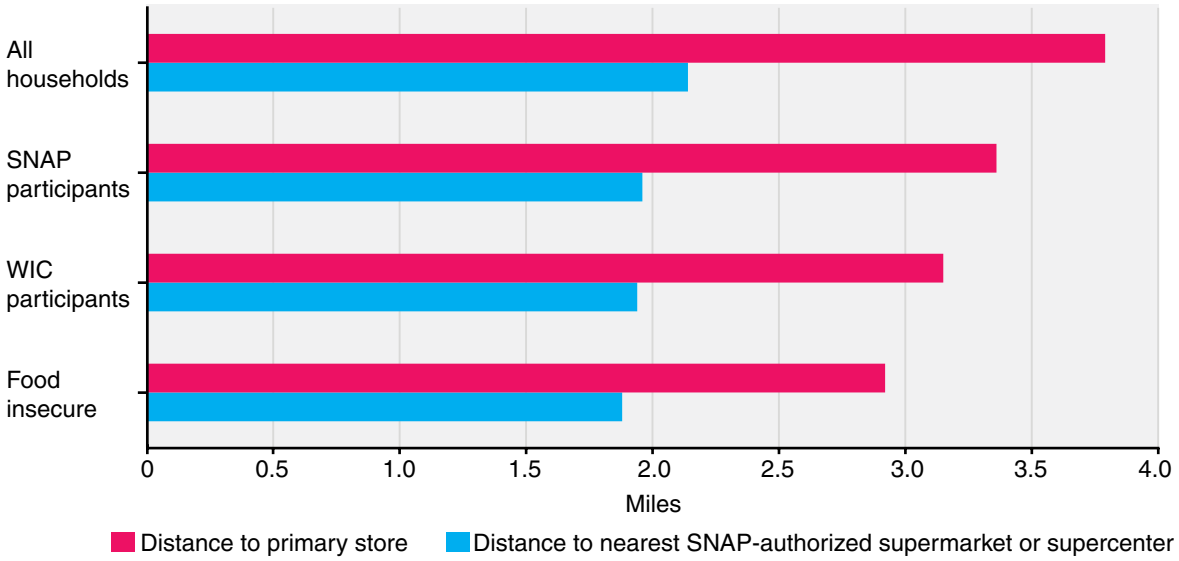
- Similarly, 91 percent of food-secure households use their own vehicle to get to their primary food store but only 70 percent of food-insecure households use their own vehicle.

Despite differences in transportation modes, households do not necessarily shop at the store that is closest to them.

- Overall, households are, on average, 2.1 miles from the nearest SNAP-authorized supermarket or supercenter, but their usual store is 3.8 miles away (fig. 8).

- Even households that do not drive their own vehicle to shop for groceries tend to shop around. Those who usually walk, bike, or take public transit or another mode

Figure 8
Distance to nearest SNAP-authorized supermarket or supercenter and to primary shopping store



SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.
WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, *Where Do Americans Usually Shop for Food and How Do they Travel to Get There? Initial Findings from the National Household Food Acquistion and Purchase Survey*, EIB-138, March 2015.

of transportation shop at stores farther from their house than the nearest store. These households are, on average, 0.5 mile from the nearest SNAP-authorized supermarket or supercenter, but do their primary shopping at a store that is 0.9 mile away, on average.

- SNAP households are, on average, just under 2 miles from the nearest SNAP-authorized supermarket or supercenter but travel 3.4 miles, on average, to the store where they do their primary shopping. WIC participants also tend to bypass the closest supermarket (just under 2 miles) to do their primary shopping (at a store 3.15 miles away, on average). For food-insecure households, the average distance to the nearest SNAP-authorized supermarket is 1.88 miles, while the average distance to the primary store is 2.92 miles.

Store proximity may be important, but clearly other store attributes—such as price, quality, and selection—affect where households do their primary food shopping. In addition, households may not go directly from home to the grocery store, but instead include food shopping in a chained (multiple-stop) trip away from home or while returning from work or school.

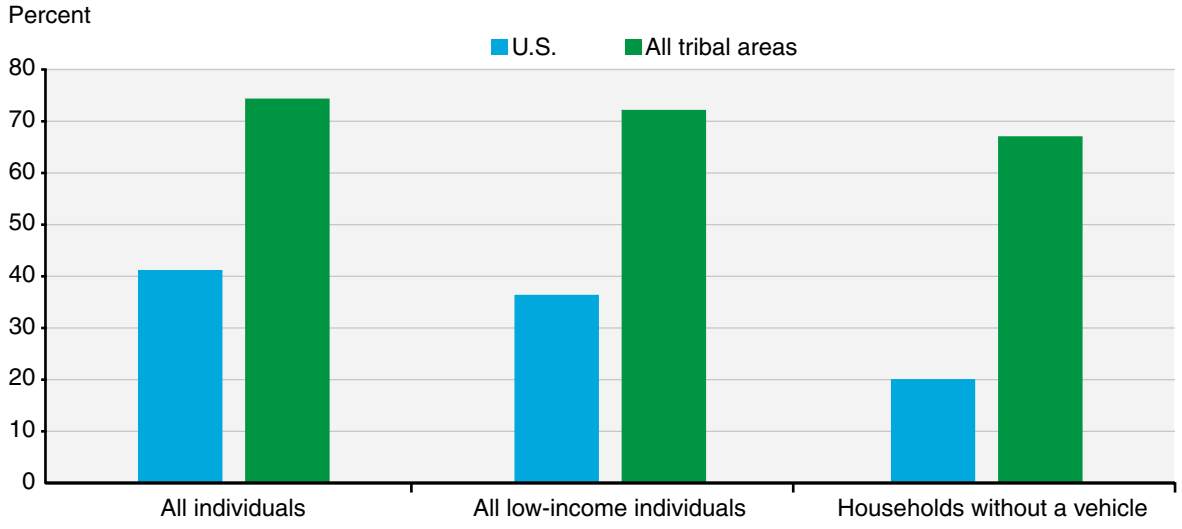
Measuring Access to Healthful, Affordable Food in American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal Areas, EIB-131, December 2014. American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) tribal populations experience about twice the rate of nutrition-related health problems—including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity—than most Americans. Prior studies cite limited access to supermarkets and other sources of affordable and nutritious foods as contributing to less healthful food choices by consumers. In many AIAN tribal areas, relatively low population density and limited incomes create disincentives for the entry of large grocery stores and supermarkets. Smaller grocery stores, convenience stores, and other retail outlets—though more prevalent in AIAN tribal areas and more

accessible—are less likely to offer affordable, healthful food choices. This ERS study used spatial analysis to examine tribal population access to sources of healthful, affordable food, based on the nearest distance to a large grocery store or supermarket. Tribal areas included in this study consisted of either American Indian Tribal Areas, Oklahoma Tribal Statistical Areas, or Alaska Native Village Statistical Areas.

Results from the study indicate that tribal area individuals and households are more likely to experience much lower levels of access to healthful, affordable food than most Americans. Comparing tribal access measures with national access measures, there were large disparities in the share of populations that are greater than 1 mile—defined as walking distance—from the nearest supermarket. For example, among all U.S. individuals, 41.2 percent lived more than 1 mile from a supermarket, compared to 74.4 percent among individuals living in tribal areas (fig. 9). Among low-income individuals, a greater share of tribal area populations (72.2 percent) lived more than 1 mile from a supermarket than the national percentage (36.4 percent). The greater distances experienced by low-income tribal area individuals imply higher costs of transportation to reach a supermarket relative to higher income individuals.

Of all U.S. households without a vehicle, 20.1 percent were more than 1 mile from a supermarket compared to 67.1 percent of households without a vehicle in tribal areas. Similarly, the median distance to a supermarket for all U.S. households without a vehicle (0.4 mile) was much shorter than among households in all tribal areas (4.1 miles). These differences indicate that tribal area households without a vehicle must depend on help from other people to reach a supermarket or rely on smaller grocery stores and other food sources.

Figure 9
Share of individuals and households more than 1 mile from a supermarket



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, *Measuring Access to Heathful, Affordable Food in American Indian and Alaskan Native Tribal Areas*, EIB-131, December 2014.

Information on food assistance research can be found on the ERS website at www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/foodnutritionassistance and on the FNS Office of Policy Support website at www.fns.usda.gov/ops/research-and-analysis. Information on USDA's food assistance programs can be found at www.fns.usda.gov. For more information on this report, contact Victor Oliveira at victoro@ers.usda.gov.