

## Major Food Assistance Programs in the United States

We now review five food assistance programs in the United States: the Food Stamp Program, WIC, the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations. In contrast with Mexico, where the food assistance programs are under SEDESOL (roughly the equivalent of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), all U.S. food assistance programs are funded by the Department of Agriculture (USDA). Food assistance programs were originally established, in part, to distribute surplus commodities and, hence, served an additional role of supporting U.S. farmers. While some food assistance programs directly support domestic agriculture by distributing surplus commodities (such as the TEFAP program, described below) or by stipulating that only commodities produced in the United States can be purchased (such as the School Lunch Program), most food assistance programs (including the largest one, the Food Stamp Program) serve this role only indirectly. Nevertheless, because these programs do increase food consumption, support for them among farmers and others in agriculture remains high and increases political support for the food assistance programs run by USDA.<sup>4</sup>

### Food Stamp Program

The Food Stamp Program is by far the largest U.S. food assistance program, serving approximately 18.2 million individuals in 1999. Children are the primary recipients of food stamp benefits: over half of all food stamp recipients are children, and 60 percent of food stamp households include children. The modern version of the program began as a pilot project in 1961 and became a nationwide program in 1974. This cornerstone of food assistance programs works under the principle that everyone has a right to food for themselves and their families and, hence, with a few exceptions, this program is available to all citizens who meet income and asset tests. Participants receive either paper “coupons” or an Electronic Benefit Transfer card for the purchase of food in authorized, privately run retail food outlets selling food to participants and nonparticipants. While authorized stores may also sell nonfood products, food stamps cannot be used to purchase nonfood items such as soap, toiletries, household paper products, prepared foods, or medicines.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>For more on the increase in food consumption due to food stamps and its resultant effect on the agricultural sector, see Kuhn, et al., 1996.

<sup>5</sup>The information used in this and the following descriptions for U.S. food assistance programs can be found in various issues of *Food Review* and on the Food and Nutrition Service’s home page, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns/>.

## The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

Nutritious supplemental foods, nutrition education, and referrals to other important health and social services are provided to low-income pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children up to the age of 5 through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). About 7 million people participate in WIC in any month: 3.8 million children, 1.9 million infants (under age 1), and 1.7 million women. WIC was established on a permanent basis in 1974. The types of food a woman can purchase with WIC coupons for her own or her children’s consumption are restricted. To meet the needs of pregnant and lactating women and their children, the foods include iron-fortified infant formula and infant cereal, iron-fortified adult cereal, fruits and vegetable juices rich in vitamin C, eggs, milk, cheese, peanut butter, and dried beans and peas. These foods are generally high in protein, calcium, iron, vitamin A, and vitamin C, nutrients frequently lacking in the diets of the program’s target population. Fewer food outlets accept WIC coupons than accept food stamps. About 46,000 merchants nationwide and some farmers markets are authorized to accept WIC coupons.

### The National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs

The National School Lunch Program provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children in kindergarten through 12th grade. Each school day, about 26 million children receive lunches through the program. The amount a child pays depends upon the child’s household’s income: about 45 percent receive free meals; 10 percent receive reduced-price meals; and 45 percent pay near-full price. The program was started in 1946 to encourage children’s consumption of nutritious food and to provide an outlet for surplus commodities. To ensure the consumption of nutritious foods, schools must meet Federal nutrition guidelines. Approximately 17 percent of the total dollar value of food in school lunches comes from 60 different kinds of foods from agricultural surplus; the rest comes from vendors chosen by the schools. Virtually all public and nonprofit private schools (94,000) participate in the program.

The National School Breakfast program is a smaller, newer program. Each school day, about 7 million children receive breakfasts through the program, breakfasts designed to provide at least one-fourth of the daily recommended levels for protein, calcium, iron, vitamin A, vitamin C, and calories. As with school lunches, the amount a child pays depends on household income, but a much higher percentage of participants receive free meals: 80 percent receive free meals; 5 percent receive reduced-price meals; and 15 percent pay near-full price. The high percentage of students receiving free meals is partly a function of the program’s larger presence in low-income schools. The program was made permanent in 1975. Like the National School Lunch Program, breakfasts must meet nutrition requirements, but the program does not mandate specific foods to be offered. Unlike

the lunch program, agricultural surpluses are not used. About 70,000 schools participate in the program.

### **The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)**

TEFAP is a Federal program that supplements the consumption of low-income households through the provision of free, healthful foods. In the course of a year, the program serves about 3.5 million households. In this program, food is purchased, processed, and packaged by the USDA, shipped to States, and then distributed to local organizations such as food banks and soup kitchens. The types of foods distributed include canned and dried fruits, fruit juice, canned vegetables, meat, poultry, fish, rice, grits, cereal, peanut butter, nonfat dry milk, dried egg mix, and pasta products. TEFAP began in 1981 with the goal of reducing Federal food inventories and storage costs by assisting the needy.

### **Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations**

This program distributes foods to low-income households living on Indian reservations and to Native American families living near reservations. About 123,000 families participate in the program in each month. This program is part of the Food Stamp Program, designed as an alternative for families without easy access to foodstores. Each month, a household receives a food package weighing between 50 and 75 pounds, containing meats, vegetables, fruits, dairy products, grains, and cereals. The USDA purchases and ships the foods through six State agencies and 94 Indian Tribal Organizations. These agencies distribute the food, determine applicant eligibility, and provide nutrition education in 218 Indian communities.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>There are other assistance programs in the United States for low-income households. These include programs to help with housing (such as public housing projects and Section 8 housing), to help with medical insurance (Medicaid), and cash assistance programs (the largest is Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)). These programs affect food consumption by enabling households to reallocate money from other necessities like housing and through the provision of extra money which can be used for purchasing food.