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# Discretionary Spending in 10 Graphs

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## Discretionary Spending in 10 Graphs

Each year, Congress provides discretionary funding for a broad range of government activities through appropriations legislation. As Congress develops and considers such legislation, debate often focuses on the desired level of discretionary spending. This report provides data to frame that debate. Discretionary spending makes up a smaller share of total federal spending than mandatory spending, and mandatory spending on entitlement programs has been largely responsible for increases in overall spending as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) in recent decades, however.

Discretionary spending has grown rapidly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in nominal dollars. This growth tracks the uptick in overall inflation since then: When adjusted for inflation, or measured as a percentage of GDP, the peak in discretionary spending is smaller and has subsequently been partially reversed. As a percentage of GDP, discretionary spending in FY2024 is projected to be 6.3%, near its historical low since data were first collected in FY1962, and down from 7.6% in FY2020 and 9.1% in FY2010. In inflation-adjusted dollar terms, discretionary spending peaked in FY2020 and has fallen in subsequent fiscal years. It remains higher than it was before the pandemic in FY2019 but lower than it was in FY2010 during the “Great Recession.”

Over time, Congress has attempted to constrain discretionary spending growth through statutory spending limits (also called caps) while allowing exemptions from those limits to provide flexibility to respond to unforeseen or emergency funding needs. Specific categories (often referred to as adjustment categories) of exempt spending include appropriations that Congress designates as being for emergency requirements, Overseas Contingency Operations/Global War on Terror (OCO/GWOT), disaster relief, certain “program integrity” initiatives, wildfire suppression activities, and the decennial census. Each year, a significant amount of discretionary spending is exempt spending. Enacted exempt budget authority was markedly higher in FY2020-FY2022 than in other fiscal years (\$615.00 billion, \$294.60 billion, and \$287.13 billion, respectively), due mostly to a sharp increase in emergency-designated spending in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. After FY2020, base (i.e., non-exempt) budget authority has trended up and exempt budget authority has trended down.

*Base* defense discretionary budget authority has been higher than *base* nondefense discretionary budget authority in each of the past 10 fiscal years. By contrast, when looking at *total* (i.e., including adjustment categories) discretionary budget authority over this period, the defense category was higher in five of the 10 years.

The House and Senate Appropriations Committees are organized into 12 parallel subcommittees that each have jurisdiction over a set of accounts that fund specific agencies, programs, projects, and activities. Funding under the jurisdiction of each Appropriations subcommittee has generally trended upward in recent years, and most of the subcommittees experienced net nominal increases in enacted base budget authority under their jurisdictions from FY2015 through FY2024. The two sets of subcommittees with the largest shares of base budget authority under their jurisdiction—(1) Defense, and (2) Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies—experienced opposite trends in their share of total base budget authority over this period. The share of total base budget authority under the jurisdiction of the Defense subcommittees increased over this period from 48.4% in FY2015 to 51.9% in FY2024. In contrast, the share of total base budget authority under the jurisdiction of the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies subcommittees decreased over this period from 15.5% in FY2015 to 12.2% in FY2024.

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**Drew C. Aherne**

Analyst on Congress and the Legislative Process

**Marc Labonte**

Specialist in Macroeconomic Policy

**Megan S. Lynch**

Specialist on Congress and the Legislative Process

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Congress makes decisions on discretionary spending (defined in the text box below) for each fiscal year through the annual development, consideration, and enactment of appropriations legislation. Appropriations legislation provides funding for a broad range of government activities, including defense, transportation, education, and community development.<sup>1</sup>

As Congress develops and considers such legislation, it may be helpful to examine aspects of discretionary spending over time. This report provides 10 graphs to answer a range of questions from the broad (*What percentage of GDP has discretionary spending historically comprised?*), to the more specific (*How have the levels of spending in an individual appropriations bill changed in recent years?*).

#### What Is Discretionary Spending?

Discretionary spending is federal spending for which the budgetary resources are provided and controlled in appropriations legislation, which is under the jurisdiction of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees. Discretionary spending is distinct from mandatory spending (also referred to as direct spending). Mandatory spending is federal spending for which the budgetary resources are provided or effectively controlled by laws other than appropriations acts, and it generally does not require legislative action to continue each year.

## Discretionary Spending as a Percentage of GDP

Members of Congress often debate how quickly federal spending is growing over time, with a particular emphasis on discretionary spending, as that is the portion of spending that Congress makes decisions on annually through the appropriations process. The simplest way to compare spending over time would be to compare the dollar amount of discretionary spending from year to year, but that would be highly misleading over long periods of time for three reasons. First, inflation (the general increase in overall prices) erodes purchasing power over time, meaning \$1 of discretionary spending this year can purchase fewer goods and services than \$1 last year could.<sup>2</sup> Second, population growth requires overall spending to grow to keep per capita spending constant. Third, growth in the size of the economy means that the dollar amount of government spending that a \$600 billion economy can support in 1962 is vastly smaller than what a \$28 trillion economy can support in 2024. In the long term, the size of the economy has grown more quickly than population and inflation have, although the size of the economy shrunk in some recessionary years. Choosing an appropriate metric for measuring spending over time depends partly on the time horizon, with share of gross domestic product (GDP) appropriate for long periods of time.

Since the aftermath of World War II, total federal spending as a share of GDP first peaked during the financial crisis (24.3% of GDP in FY2009) and then reached a new peak early in the COVID-19 pandemic (30.8% of GDP in FY2020).<sup>3</sup> Spending has fallen since FY2020 but remains above its long-term average at 23.9% of GDP in FY2024. Mandatory spending growth has driven the growth in total spending as a percent of GDP over the past two decades. **Figure 1** shows that discretionary spending (a projected 6.3% of GDP in FY2024) is currently significantly smaller than mandatory spending (14.5% of GDP). Discretionary spending as a share of GDP has been falling over the decades—it was 12.3% of GDP in FY1962—while mandatory spending has been

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the appropriations process, see CRS Report R47106, *The Appropriations Process: A Brief Overview*, by James V. Saturno and Megan S. Lynch.

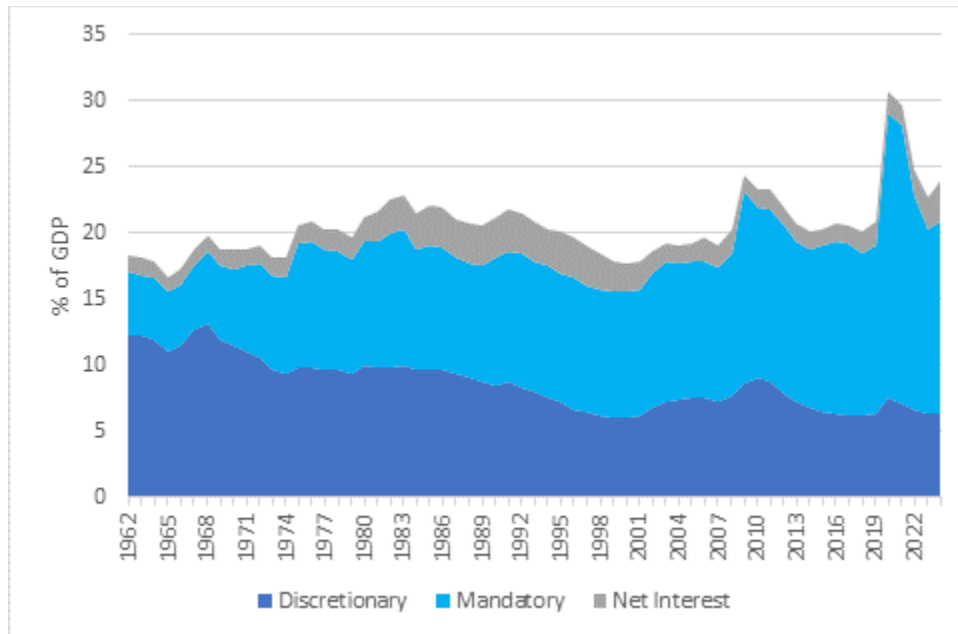
<sup>2</sup> See CRS In Focus IF10477, *Introduction to U.S. Economy: Inflation*, by Lida R. Weinstock.

<sup>3</sup> As a share of GDP, spending rose during those crises both because spending in dollars rose and GDP declined or stagnated. In this section, spending is measured by outlays.

rising—it was 4.8% of GDP in FY1962.<sup>4</sup> Long-term mandatory spending growth has been primarily driven by elderly entitlement spending growth due to the aging of the population and growing health care costs (even when adjusting for inflation).<sup>5</sup>

(The third major category of federal spending is net interest, which measures interest paid on the federal debt less interest income. Although small compared to discretionary and mandatory spending, net interest has more than doubled as a share of GDP since FY2021 due to rising debt and rising interest rates.)

**Figure 1. Federal Spending as a Percentage of GDP**  
FY1962-FY2024



**Sources:** Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Congressional Budget Office (CBO).

**Notes:** Spending is measured by outlays. FY2024 is CBO estimate.

In contrast to total spending, discretionary spending has declined since FY1962 as a percentage of GDP. Discretionary outlays are projected to be 6.3% of GDP, near an all-time low, in FY2024.<sup>6</sup> The long-term decline in discretionary spending as a share of GDP has been driven by a decline in defense discretionary spending (see **Figure 2**). Nondefense discretionary spending was the same share of GDP in FY1962 and FY2024 (3.3%). In between, nondefense discretionary tended to rise in recessions and fall in expansions and was generally higher from the late 1960s to early 1980s than before or after. Meanwhile, defense discretionary spending fell from 9.0% of GDP in FY1962 to 2.9% of GDP in FY2000. This decline is often referred to as the “peace dividend” following the end of the Cold War. It then rose during wars in Afghanistan and Iraq but is back to a projected 3.0% of GDP in 2024. Defense discretionary spending exceeded nondefense discretionary spending until FY1995 and then was comparable in size until FY2020. Nondefense

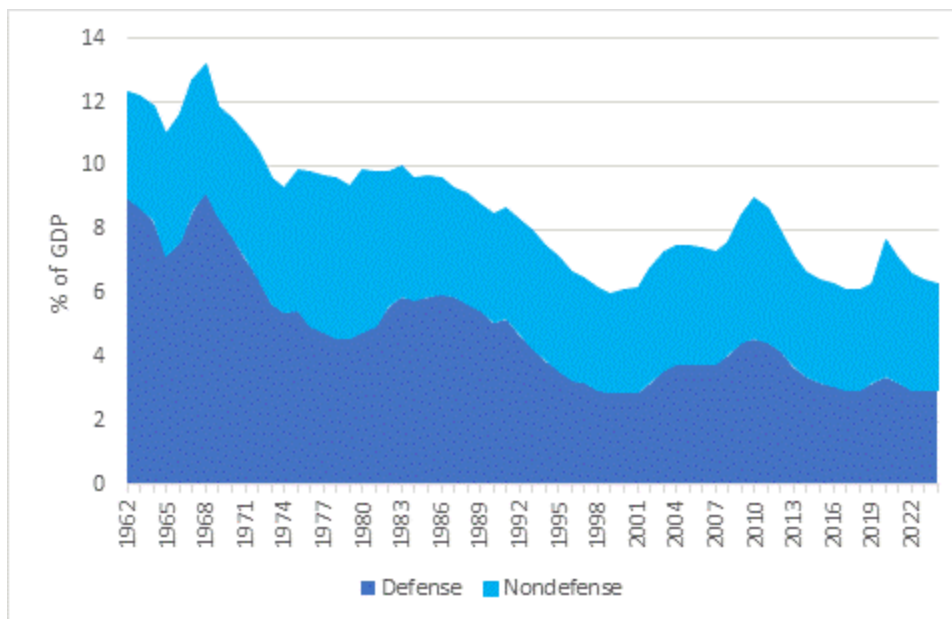
<sup>4</sup> The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has historical spending data broken down by discretionary and mandatory spending going back to 1962.

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see Figure 5 of CRS Report R44641, *Trends in Mandatory Spending*, by D. Andrew Austin.

<sup>6</sup> The all-time low is 6.0% in FY1999. Data are not available before FY1962. Spending has declined as a percentage of GDP, because GDP has increased more quickly than spending has.

discretionary spending (as measured by outlays) has exceeded defense discretionary spending since FY2020.

**Figure 2. Discretionary Spending as a Percentage of GDP**  
FY1962-FY2024



**Sources:** OMB, CBO.

**Notes:** Spending is measured by outlays. FY2024 is CBO estimate.

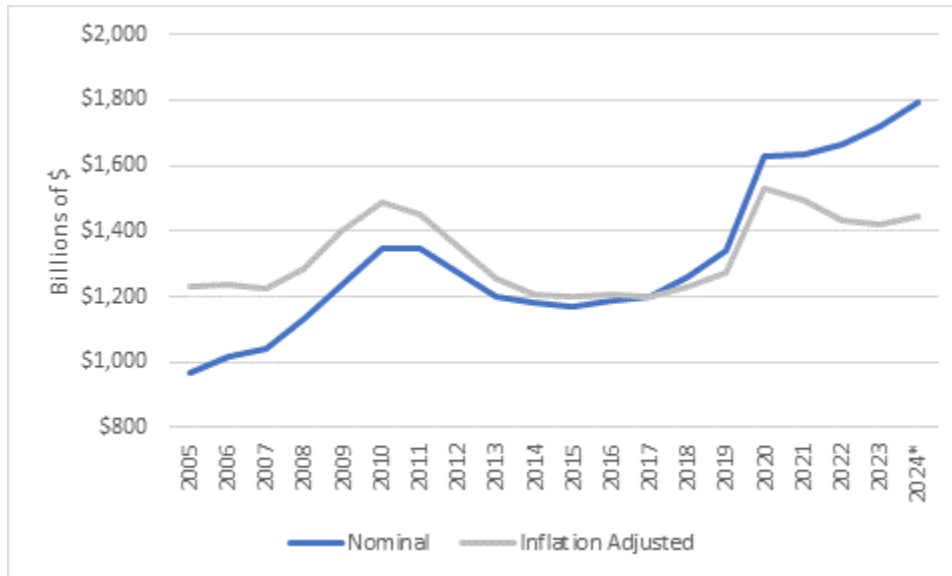
## Discretionary Spending Adjusted for Inflation

In nominal dollars, **Figure 3** shows that discretionary spending has generally risen over the past 20 years.<sup>7</sup> This increase is mostly keeping pace with inflation: Once adjusted for inflation, discretionary spending is lower in FY2024 than it was in FY2010 or FY2011.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In this section, spending is measured in outlays.

<sup>8</sup> One could argue that a simple inflation adjustment underestimates how much spending must rise over time to provide a constant amount of government goods and services, as labor costs of government workers typically outpace inflation. CBO takes account of this in its baseline projections of discretionary spending. See CBO, *CBO Explains How It Develops the Budget Baseline*, April 2023, <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/59085>.

**Figure 3. Discretionary Spending, Nominal vs. Inflation-Adjusted**  
FY2005-FY2024



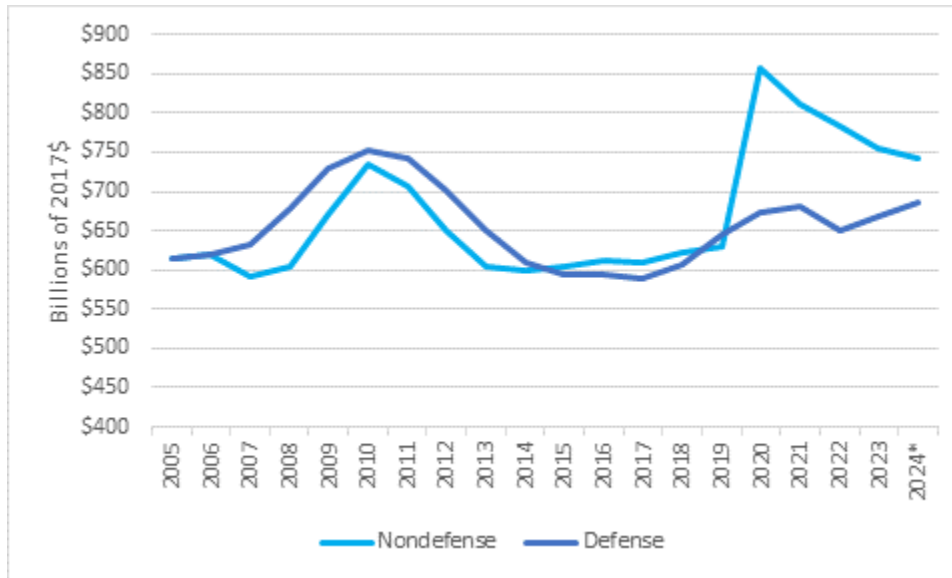
**Sources:** OMB, CRS calculations using CBO data.

**Notes:** Spending is measured by outlays. Inflation-adjusted spending is expressed in 2017 dollars.

\* FY2024 is CBO estimate, adjusted for inflation by CRS.

Inflation-adjusted discretionary spending shows two peaks—during the financial crisis and the start of the pandemic—with lower spending levels (i.e., nominal spending grew by less than inflation) before and after recessions associated with those crises. Congress enacted fiscal stimulus and emergency relief in response to both crises that caused inflation-adjusted discretionary spending to temporarily rise. As the crises subsided, that stimulus was eventually withdrawn. The injection and subsequent withdrawal of stimulus mainly affected nondefense discretionary spending, with inflation-adjusted defense discretionary driven mainly by military priorities rather than economic conditions. Defense discretionary has increased by less than nondefense since FY2019, as shown in **Figure 4**. Adjusted for inflation, defense discretionary spending is projected to be lower in FY2024 than it was in FY2009-FY2012 but higher than it was from FY2013 to FY2019.

**Figure 4. Inflation-Adjusted Defense and Nondefense Discretionary Spending**  
FY2005-FY2024



**Source:** OMB.

**Notes:** Spending is measured by outlays. Inflation-adjusted spending is expressed in 2017 dollars.

\* FY2024 is CBO estimate, adjusted for inflation by CRS.

In most years, inflation is relatively low—it averaged 2.2% from FY1992 to FY2020, as measured by the consumer price index. Following the post-pandemic reopening of the economy, annual inflation was unusually high—7.9% in FY2022 and 5.1% in FY2023.<sup>9</sup> After the large increase in discretionary spending in FY2020 in response to the pandemic, nominal spending grew at a lower rate than inflation, meaning that inflation-adjusted discretionary spending declined each year from FY2021 to FY2023.<sup>10</sup> As of FY2024, inflation-adjusted discretionary spending was below FY2020 levels but was higher than FY2019 pre-pandemic levels. Whether discretionary spending is “too high” or “too low” is a normative policy question that depends on policy priorities and economic tradeoffs and cannot be answered exclusively by looking at trends over time. As discussed above, reasons why discretionary spending might not return to FY2019 levels in inflation-adjusted dollar terms include population growth and economic growth since then, as well as policy considerations.

### Budget Authority vs. Outlays

This section looks at discretionary spending trends using data for *outlays*, which is the amount of funds paid out by the Treasury in a given year. The following section looks at *budget authority* for discretionary spending. When Congress enacts an appropriation, it is providing an agency with *budget authority* (the legal authority to commit federal funds to be spent) to finance federal programs and activities. This budget authority allows agencies to enter into various financial obligations and for the Treasury to subsequently outlay the funds to meet those obligations. Whether outlays or budget authority are a more appropriate metric depends on how the data are being used. When observing congressional actions, budget authority may at times be more appropriate, as it is the measure

<sup>9</sup> For more information, see CRS Report R47273, *Inflation in the U.S. Economy: Causes and Policy Options*, by Marc Labonte and Lida R. Weinstock.

<sup>10</sup> Budgetary data are adjusted for inflation using price deflators based on the inflation rate in the goods and services purchased by the government. OMB estimates that the inflation rate for total, defense, and nondefense outlays has been lower than the consumer price index (CPI) since the pandemic. If compared to the CPI instead, inflation-adjusted discretionary spending would have declined by a greater amount from FY2021 to FY2024.



that more directly reflects congressional decision-making. When observing the effect of spending on the economy, outlays are typically more appropriate, as outlays measure when the spending occurred. When looking at year-to-year changes in spending, outlays are less volatile than budget authority because budget authority is mostly granted immediately, although Congress sometimes intends for it to be spent over a number of years. This is particularly true of large stimulus/emergency relief packages, such as those enacted in 2009 and 2020-2021.

## Detailed Information on Discretionary Budget Authority Since FY2015

Over time, Congress has created restrictions for itself designed to limit the levels of discretionary spending for each fiscal year.<sup>11</sup> These restrictions are both procedural (meaning they can be enforced through points of order) and statutory (meaning they are enforced through sequestration).<sup>12</sup>

To provide Congress with flexibility to respond to unforeseen or emergency funding needs, these restrictions have generally allowed certain spending to be effectively exempt from budgetary enforcement procedures (e.g., emergency spending). Discretionary spending levels described as “base spending” do not include such exempt spending, while discretionary spending levels described as “total spending” include both base and exempt spending. (Neither “base” nor “total” discretionary spending include mandatory funding that was provided in recent years to accounts that had previously been funded solely through discretionary funding.<sup>13</sup>)

### Base Discretionary Budget Authority for FY2015-FY2024

**Figure 5** shows total enacted base discretionary budget authority for FY2015-FY2024. As discussed above, larger increases in base spending beginning in FY2022 have coincided with higher inflation.

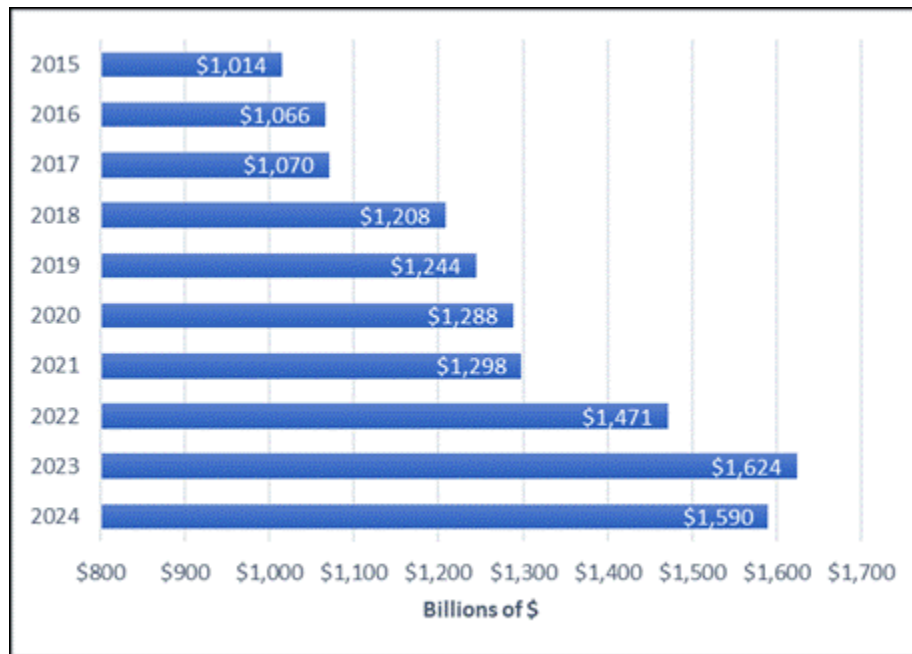
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<sup>11</sup> In this section, spending is measured in budget authority.

<sup>12</sup> For more information on points of order, see CRS Report R47413, *Points of Order in the Congressional Budget Process*, by James V. Saturno and Megan S. Lynch. For more information on sequestration, see CRS Report R42972, *Sequestration as a Budget Enforcement Process: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Megan S. Lynch. For more information on discretionary spending constraints, see CRS Insight IN12093, *Were the Discretionary Spending Caps Effective?*, by Megan S. Lynch.

<sup>13</sup> For example, this includes such funding provided in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (P.L. 117-2) and the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (P.L. 117-169).

**Figure 5. Base Discretionary Budget Authority: FY2015-FY2024**  
In Billions of Nominal Dollars



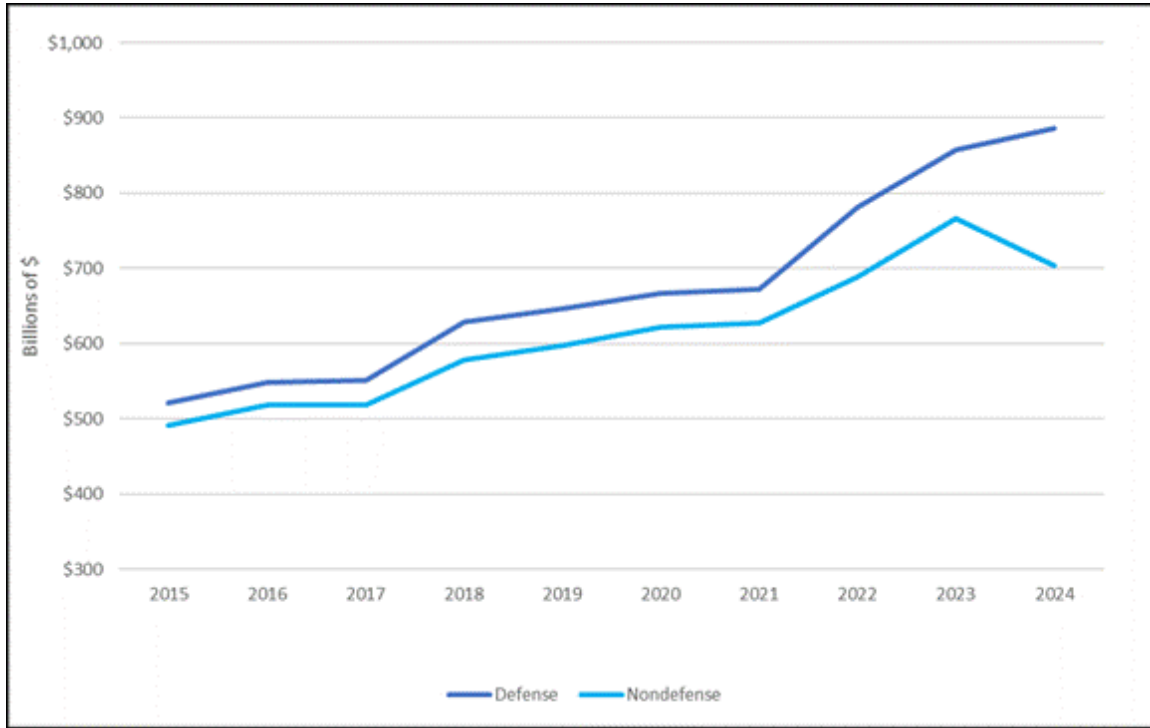
**Source:** CBO, *Status of Discretionary Appropriations* (House) reports for FY2015-FY2024.

In recent decades, statutory limits on discretionary spending have included separately enforceable limits for the defense discretionary and nondefense discretionary categories. Congressional negotiations on total appropriations levels have sometimes involved discussions of “parity” and whether defense and nondefense funding levels should be subject to equal increases or decreases. **Figure 6** shows base levels of budget authority provided for defense discretionary spending and nondefense discretionary spending for FY2015-FY2024.

Levels depicted in **Figure 6** do not include exempt spending described below, nor do they include mandatory spending that was provided to traditionally discretionary-funded accounts in bills outside of the appropriations process. As discussed in the next section, once exempt spending is included, the trend and relative size of total defense and nondefense discretionary budget authority changes.

**Figure 6. Base Defense and Nondefense Discretionary Budget Authority: FY2015-FY2024**

In Billions of Nominal Dollars

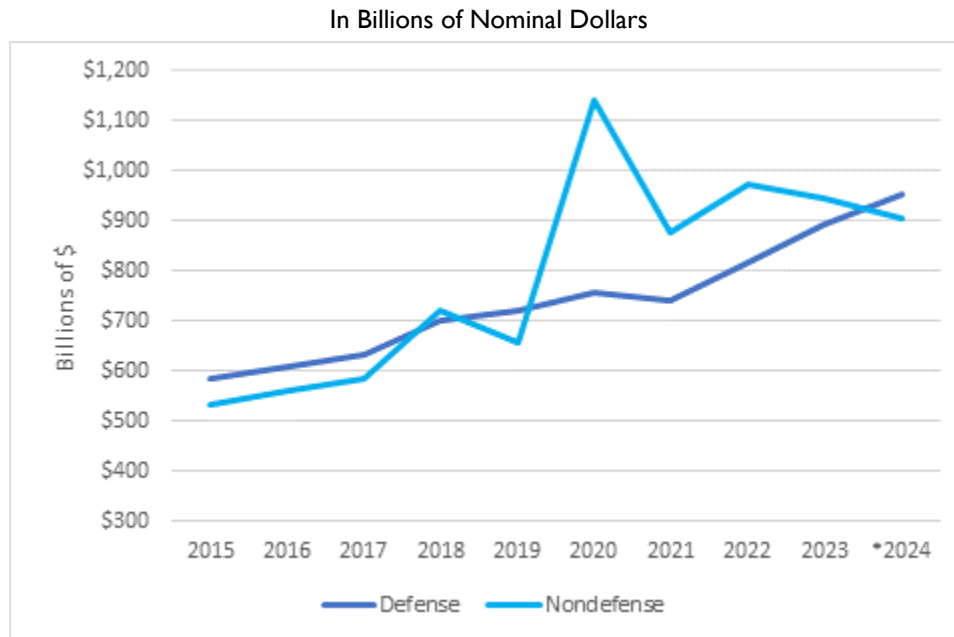


**Source:** CBO, *Status of Discretionary Appropriations* (House) reports for FY2015-FY2024.

## Total Discretionary Budget Authority for FY2015-FY2024

As described above, total discretionary spending includes both base discretionary spending and discretionary spending for purposes that are exempt from budgetary enforcement procedures. **Figure 7** shows total discretionary budget authority enacted by Congress from FY2015 through FY2024. *Base* defense discretionary budget authority has been higher than *base* nondefense discretionary budget authority in each of the past 10 fiscal years. When looking at *total* discretionary budget authority (i.e., including adjustment categories) over this period, the defense category was higher in FY2015-FY2017, FY2019, and FY2024. *Total* nondefense budget authority was higher in FY2018 and FY2020-FY2023.<sup>14</sup> (More detail on the difference between total and base spending is provided in **Figure 8**.)

<sup>14</sup> Although total *budget authority* for defense was higher than nondefense in FY2024, defense *outlays* are projected to be lower because of the continued spend out from higher nondefense budget authority in previous years.

**Figure 7. Total Defense and Nondefense Discretionary Budget Authority: FY2015-FY2024**

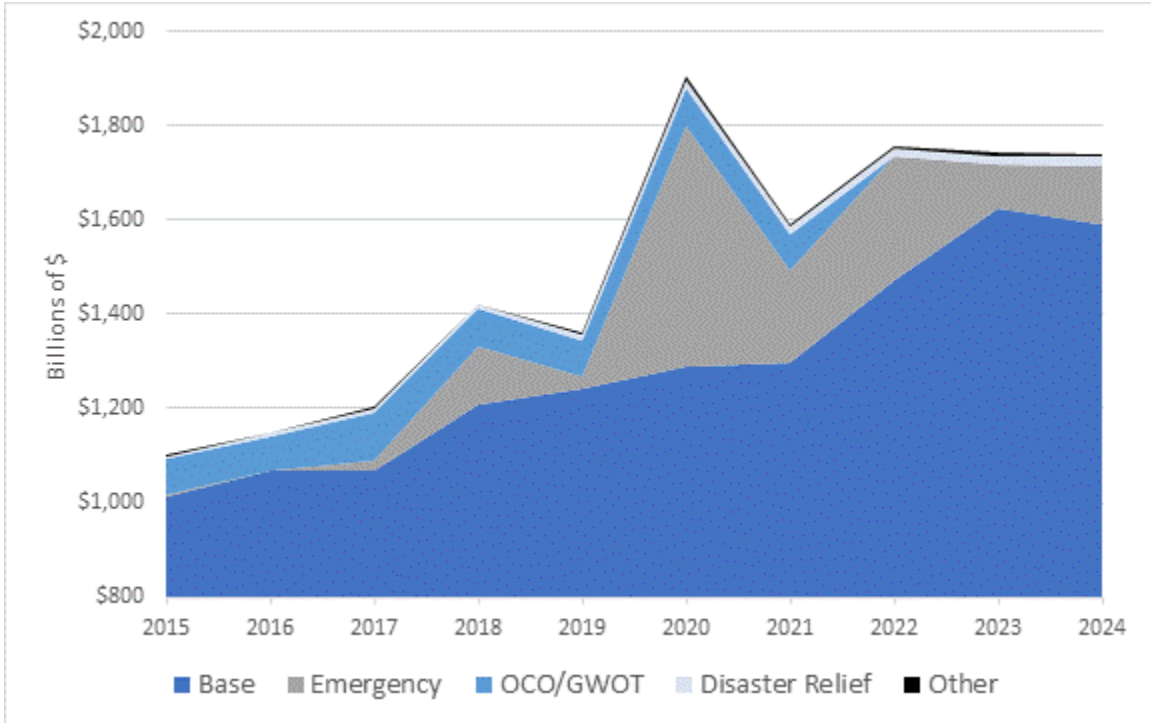
**Source:** OMB, CRS calculations using CBO data.

**Note:** \* FY2024 is a CBO estimate.

Current law allows Congress to designate discretionary budget authority for multiple purposes (“adjustment categories”) that are exempt from budget enforcement procedures. This has included spending for purposes Congress designates as being for emergency requirements,<sup>15</sup> Overseas Contingency Operations/Global War on Terror (OCO/GWOT), disaster relief, certain “program integrity” initiatives, wildfire suppression activities, and the decennial census. **Figure 8** shows total enacted discretionary budget authority for FY2015-FY2024, with exempt budget authority broken down by adjustment category. Budget authority for exempt purposes ranged over this period from a low of \$84.43 billion in FY2016 to a high of \$615.00 billion in FY2020. Enacted exempt budget authority was markedly higher in FY2020-FY2022 than in other years over this period (\$615.00 billion, \$294.60 billion, and \$287.13 billion, respectively) due in large part to emergency-designated spending in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Enacted exempt budget authority then fell relative to those years in FY2023 (\$117.95 billion) and FY2024 (\$149.33 billion). As **Figure 8** shows, exempt spending is large enough to change the overall pattern of spending increases in the past 10 years. Total budget authority saw a large increase in FY2020 followed by a decline in FY2021, whereas base spending saw its largest increase in FY2022 and FY2023.

<sup>15</sup> For more on emergency designations in the congressional budget process, see CRS Report R47594, *Budget Enforcement Rules: Emergency Designations*, by Drew C. Aherne.

**Figure 8. Total Discretionary Budget Authority by Category: FY2015-FY2024**  
 In Billions of Nominal Dollars



**Source:** CBO, *Status of Discretionary Appropriations* (House) reports for FY2015-FY2024.

**Notes:** The “Other” category includes exempt funding for wildfire suppression activities, certain program integrity initiatives, and \$2.5 billion in funding for FY2020 for the 2020 Decennial Census.

## Discretionary Budget Authority by Appropriations Subcommittee

Since 2007, the House and Senate Appropriations Committees have been organized into 12 parallel subcommittees that each have jurisdiction over a set of accounts that fund specific agencies, programs, projects, and activities. Each subcommittee is responsible for developing its chamber’s version of one of the 12 regular appropriations bills for each fiscal year. For any given fiscal year, accounts under the jurisdiction of each subcommittee may also receive budget authority through supplemental appropriations legislation or continuing resolutions (or, as mentioned above, as mandatory spending provided in laws other than appropriations acts).

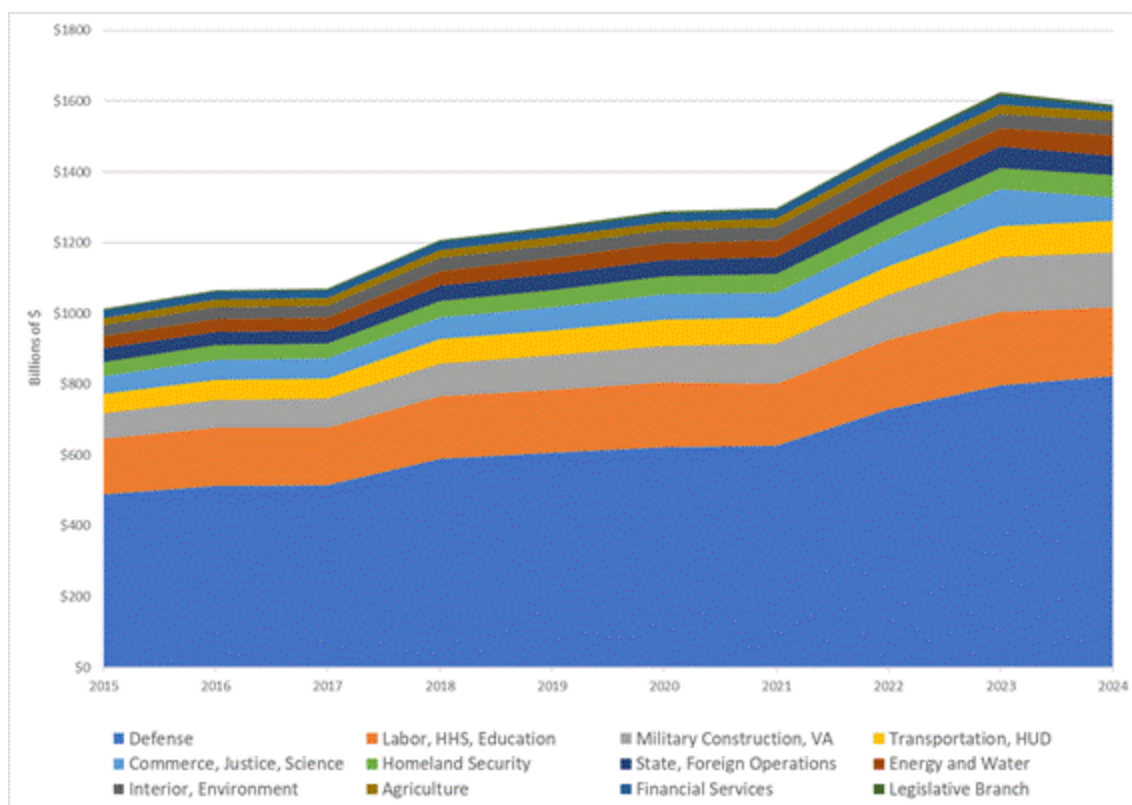
House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees	
1. Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies	7. Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
2. Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies	8. Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies
3. Defense	9. Legislative Branch
4. Energy and Water Development, and Related Agencies	10. Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
5. Financial Services and General Government	11. State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
6. Department of Homeland Security	12. Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies

The amount of budget authority under the jurisdiction of each subcommittee is often of interest to Members during the appropriations process for each fiscal year, as it may be viewed in part as a general reflection of congressional priorities related to funding for certain agencies, programs, projects, or activities. Procedural and statutory limitations on total discretionary spending levels may also generate interest in amounts under the jurisdiction of each subcommittee, as subcommittees may be viewed as competing for a finite amount of budgetary resources.

**Figure 9** shows the amount of enacted base budget authority under the jurisdiction of each appropriations subcommittee as a share of the total from FY2015 through FY2024. The figure includes base budget authority provided in all enacted appropriations legislation over this period, including regular, continuing, and supplemental appropriations legislation.

**Figure 9. Base Discretionary Budget Authority by Appropriations Subcommittee: FY2015-FY2024**

In Billions of Nominal Dollars



**Source:** CBO, *Status of Discretionary Appropriations* (House) reports for FY2015-FY2024.

**Notes:** This figure includes only enacted base discretionary budget authority, meaning that it does not include budget authority for purposes that are generally exempt from budget enforcement (“adjustment categories”).

As **Figure 9** shows, the Appropriations subcommittees vary in the amount of budget authority under their jurisdictions. The Defense subcommittees have the most budget authority under their jurisdiction, including the vast majority of total spending in the defense discretionary category. The Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies subcommittees have the second most budget authority under their jurisdiction and comprise the largest share of spending in the nondefense discretionary category among all subcommittees.

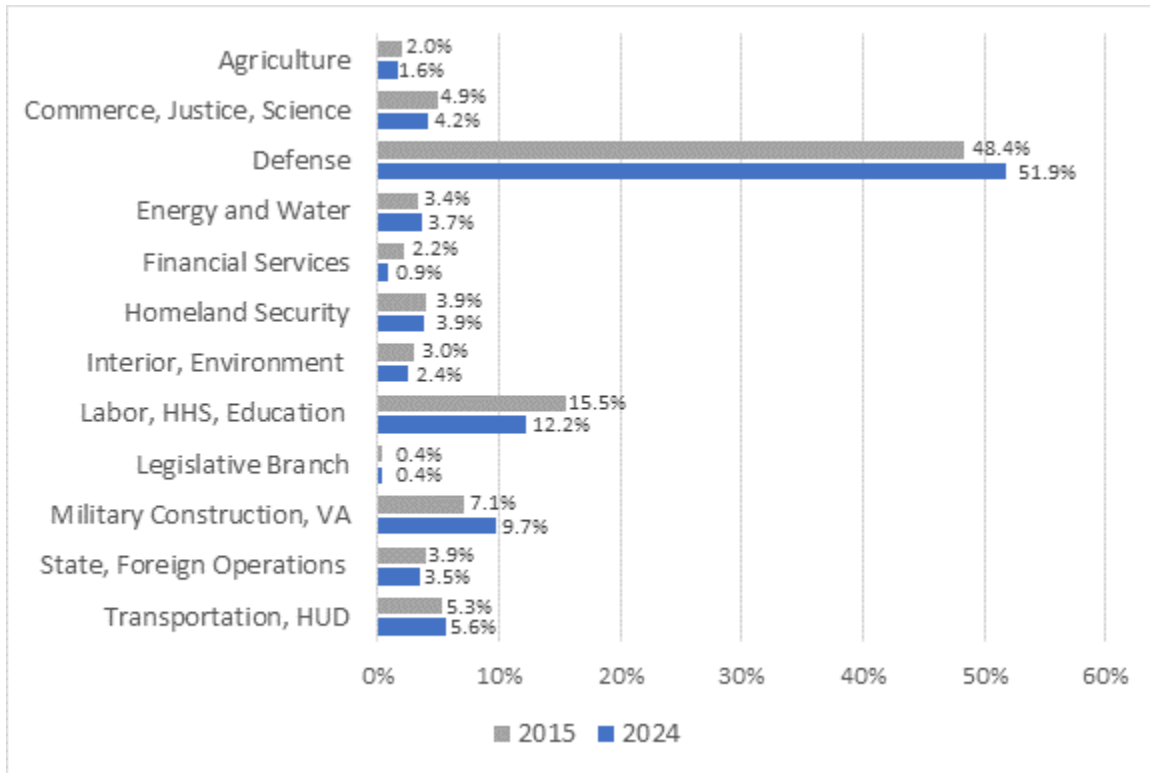
Funding under the jurisdiction of each Appropriations subcommittee has generally trended upward in recent years, and most of the subcommittees experienced net nominal increases in enacted base budget authority under their jurisdictions from FY2015 through FY2024.<sup>16</sup> In nominal terms, the Defense subcommittees saw the largest growth in base budget authority under their jurisdiction over this period, growing \$334.29 billion from \$490.19 billion in FY2015 to \$824.48 billion in FY2024 (an increase of 68.2%). The Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies subcommittees saw the largest increase in percentage terms, increasing 114.3% (or \$82.11 billion) from \$71.81 billion in base budget authority in FY2015 to \$153.92 billion in FY2024.

Policy and funding priorities, funding needs for specific accounts, and mandatory funding provided in legislation other than appropriations acts, among other factors, generally change from year to year and may affect the amount of base budget authority enacted under the jurisdiction of each Appropriations subcommittee for each fiscal year. As a result, Appropriations subcommittees generally experience different rates of growth year over year, and the relative amount of budget authority under each subcommittee's jurisdiction has changed over time. One way of looking at these trends is to compare budget authority under the jurisdiction of each pair of subcommittees as a percentage share of the total across time. **Figure 10** does so by comparing base budget authority under the jurisdiction of each pair of subcommittees as a percentage share of total base budget authority in FY2015 and FY2024, respectively.

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<sup>16</sup> Only the Financial Services and General Government subcommittees experienced a net nominal decrease in enacted base budget authority under its jurisdiction over this period. It should be noted, however, that budget authority under the jurisdiction of the Financial Services and General Government subcommittees experienced a net increase from FY2015-FY2023 before falling from \$27.56 billion in FY2023 to \$13.73 billion in FY2024. This decrease was due largely to rescissions of mandatory funding for the Internal Revenue Service provided through the Inflation Reduction Act (P.L. 117-169). For more on changes to mandatory spending in appropriations bills, see CRS Report R47705, *Congressional Rules Pertaining to Changes in Mandatory Program Spending in Appropriations Bills (CHIMPs)*, by Drew C. Aherne, Megan S. Lynch, and James V. Saturno.

**Figure 10. Base Discretionary Budget Authority by Subcommittee, as Share of Total FY2015 and FY2024**



**Source:** CRS calculations using data from CBO, *Status of Discretionary Appropriations (House)* reports for FY2015-FY2024.

Over the period of FY2015-FY2024, five Appropriations subcommittees experienced net increases in the shares of total enacted base budget authority under their jurisdictions, while the remaining seven experienced net decreases. The two subcommittees with the largest shares of base budget authority under their jurisdictions—(1) Defense and (2) Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies—experienced opposite trends in their shares of total base budget authority over this period. The share of total base budget authority under the jurisdiction of the Defense subcommittees increased 3.5 percentage points over this period, from 48.4% in FY2015 to 51.9% in FY2024. In contrast, the share of total base budget authority under the jurisdiction of the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies subcommittees decreased 3.2 percentage points over this period from 15.5% in FY2015 to 12.2% in FY2024.



## **Author Information**

Drew C. Aherne  
Analyst on Congress and the Legislative Process

Megan S. Lynch  
Specialist on Congress and the Legislative Process

Marc Labonte  
Specialist in Macroeconomic Policy

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