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U.S. Retail Food Price Data: Frequently Asked Questions and Issues for Congress

July 2, 2025

Congressional Research Service
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R48589

CRS REPORT
Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

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SUMMARY

R48589

July 2, 2025

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U.S. Retail Food Price Data: Frequently Asked Questions and Issues for Congress

U.S. consumers, particularly low-income consumers, may face challenges during periods of rising food prices. Policymakers may find it helpful to understand federal sources for U.S. retail food price data and for other intermediary commodity prices (e.g., producer prices and wholesale prices). These data and their trends provide various snapshots of the U.S. retail price environment, which may track agricultural market and U.S. retail food price changes related to administrative actions and formulation of policy solutions.

Federal Data Sources and Using Them to Identify Trends

The Department of Labor (DOL) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) track and report U.S. commodity prices, wholesale prices, and retail food prices, and these data can be used to examine the differences among retail food prices at the farm, wholesale, and retail stages of the agricultural production and marketing chain (i.e., agricultural supply chain). DOL's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) collects data on U.S. retail food prices, and USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) collects data on U.S. retail food feature prices (i.e., prices that reflect discount pricing). USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) does not collect data; instead, it generally makes forecasts and reports estimates that reflect U.S. retail food price data collected from federal and nonfederal sources. The four U.S. retail food price data sources are (1) BLS's Consumer Price Index (CPI), (2) AMS's Market News retail feature data, (3) ERS's Food Price Outlook, and (4) ERS's Food Expenditure Series. The four data sources that can be used to examine the value of products along the agricultural supply chain are (1) BLS's Producer Price Index; (2) AMS's Market News reports for commodities, livestock, and dairy; (3) ERS's Food Dollar Series; and (4) ERS's price spread data series.

The four federal data sources that provide information on the U.S. retail food price environment each report multiple measures that may provide a different snapshot of U.S. retail food prices and consumer spending. Although these four measures generally move in the same direction (i.e., all increase or all decrease over the same time period), the magnitude of the annual or monthly percentage changes varies. For example, according to the ERS Food Expenditure Series, in 2021, annual total U.S. food expenditures increased about 16%, and annual total food expenditures on *food at home* increased about 8%. According to BLS, the CPI for all food increased about 4% year over year, and the CPI for food at home increased about 3% year over year. As another example, in February 2025, the monthly BLS average price for a dozen grade A large white eggs increased 19% from January 2025, the CPI for all urban consumers for all eggs increased 13%, and AMS Market News data indicated a 56% increase in the average feature price for a dozen grade A large white eggs.

The agricultural supply chain involves multiple processes. These stages (i.e., production, manufacturing, processing, and packaging) may transform agricultural commodities into food for human consumption. For the agricultural supply chains that produce food for human consumption, the food processing, wholesaling, and retailing costs generally account for a larger share of food prices than farm inputs and production costs. According to USDA data, wholesaling and retail costs accounted for about 63-67 cents per food-at-home dollar, respectively, for 2019 and 2023, whereas farm inputs and production costs accounted for about 13-16 cents per food-at-home dollar, respectively.

Food Prices and Issues for Congress

Federal agencies generally do not have a direct role in controlling retail food prices or food price inflation but typically target different aspects of the food economy, which results in indirect effects on U.S. food price inflation. In general, federal agencies' roles fall into four categories: (1) investment, (2) technical assistance, (3) research and data, and (4) oversight.

The 119th Congress has debated policies and examined executive branch strategies related to U.S. retail food prices. Policy issues of potential congressional interest include U.S. food price inflation, the federal government's resources for collecting U.S. retail food price data, and usability of published U.S. retail food price data from federal sources.

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Introduction

U.S. consumers, particularly low-income consumers, may face challenges during periods of rising food prices.[1] Policymakers may find it helpful to understand federal sources for U.S. retail food price data and other intermediary commodity prices (e.g., producer prices and wholesale prices). These data and their trends provide various snapshots of the U.S. retail price environment and may be used to understand, devise, and track the effects of federal policy.

Two federal agencies track changes in U.S. retail food prices over time: the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). DOL and USDA publish four data sources that include a collection of datasets and data visualizations: the Consumer Price Index (CPI), Market News retail feature data, Food Price Outlook, and Food Expenditure Series.

This report provides an overview of these four data sources, illustrates how statistics calculated from these different data sources may lead to different understandings of changes in the retail food price environment, and discusses some key differences across the data sources. This report also discusses the link between U.S. agricultural commodity prices and U.S. retail food prices and illustrates how statistics that measure changes in U.S. retail food prices and statistics that measure price changes at other points of sale along the agricultural supply chain may lead to different understandings of the U.S. retail food price environment. This report also provides an overview of selected options for congressional and administrative policy strategies that target different aspects of the food economy, with indirect effects on U.S. food prices, as well as other issues of potential interest to Congress. Polices related to improving household food security and increasing food demand (e.g., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) are not discussed in this report.[2]

Information in this report is meant to illustrate what kind of data are available for examining trends in U.S. retail food prices. Additionally, the report discusses the similarities and differences among the datasets, primarily using data from 2018 through April 2025.

What Federal Data Sources Are Available to Track U.S. Retail Food Prices?

DOL and USDA track U.S. retail food prices over time.[3] DOL's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) collects data on U.S. retail food prices, and USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) collects data on U.S. retail food feature prices (i.e., prices that reflect discount pricing).[4] USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) generally reports estimates that are based on U.S. retail food

[1] Food price inflation can be due to general inflationary pressure on the economy as well as food-specific factors, which may vary by the type of food. For households with low disposable income, where food expenditures are a large share of the budget, rising food prices result in diminished purchasing power and may force difficult budgetary trade-offs. In the aggregate, periods of prolonged or permanent changes to household consumption behavior may impact the health and nutritional status of certain segments of the population.

[2] For more information on federal nutrition assistance policy, see CRS Report R42505, *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): A Primer on Eligibility and Benefits*, and CRS In Focus IF12255, *Farm Bill Primer: SNAP and Nutrition Title Programs*.

[3] Private entities also collect and report data on retail food prices, expenditures, and establishments. These are usually proprietary data sources, and data users are required to pay a subscription or fee to access the data. Two examples of such data are the retail-based scanner datasets from Circana OmniMarket Core Outlets and NielsenIQ.

[4] For more information on the functions of the Department of Labor (DOL), see CRS In Focus IF10975, *Major Functions of the U.S. Department of Labor*.

pricing data that are collected from federal and nonfederal entities but does not collect data itself. The four federal U.S. retail food price data sources are

1. BLS's CPI data series;
2. AMS's Market News retail feature data reports;
3. ERS's Food Price Outlook; and
4. ERS's Food Expenditure Series.

Consumer Price Index Data Series

DOL BLS produces the CPI for food, a widely cited measure of U.S. food price inflation. BLS reports CPI data for the nation, four Census regions, and 23 metropolitan statistical areas.[5] To calculate the CPI for food, BLS collects data on retail prices for foods and other goods and services.[6] Market reporters collect pricing information for the CPI by visiting brick-and-mortar stores, making telephone inquiries, and/or viewing a retail outlet's information online (e.g., website or app).[7] BLS publishes the CPIs for groups of food products (e.g., cereals and bakery products; fruits and vegetables; and meats, poultry, fish, and eggs), sometimes referred to as "market baskets," and tracks the differing costs of those products over time. BLS also publishes CPI data and average U.S. retail food price data on individual food products, such as fresh apples, bananas, fresh whole milk, fresh whole chicken, and eggs. The CPI for food and the average U.S. retail food price data are published on a monthly basis; CPI data are reported on a one-month lag.[8]

DOL's authority to collect and report CPI data, among other data series (e.g., Producer Price Index, or PPI), comes from the statute establishing BLS.[9] According to BLS, the cost to the federal government of collecting and disseminating prices and cost-of-living data, which include the CPI and PPI data series, was about $220 million in FY2021, $229 million in FY2022, $241 million in each of FY2023 and FY2024, and $244 million in FY2025.[10]

Market News Retail Feature Data

USDA AMS collects national and regional data on U.S. retail food feature prices.[11] AMS publishes these data in weekly Market News retail feature reports. In these reports, AMS

[5] For more information on the 4 Census regions and 23 metropolitan statistical areas used by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), see BLS, "Consumer Price Index: Appendix 1. CPI Geographic Sample, 2018," May 12, 2023, https://www.bls.gov/cpi/additional-resources/geographic-sample.htm.

[6] For more information on inflation in the U.S. economy, see CRS Report R47273, *Inflation in the U.S. Economy: Causes and Policy Options*.

[7] BLS, "Consumer Price Index: Data Sources," January 30, 2025, https://www.bls.gov/opub/hom/cpi/data.htm; and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), Livestock, Poultry, and Seed Program, *Market Reporter's Handbook*, revised February 2021, https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/LPGMNReporterHandbook.pdf.

[8] The one-month lag refers to a delay of one month in data reporting. For example, BLS published the Consumer Price Index (CPI) data for April 2025 in May 2025.

[9] 29 U.S.C. §1 and §2.

[10] DOL, *FY2026 Congressional Budget Justification: Bureau of Labor Statistics*, https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/general/budget/2026/CBJ-2026-V3-01.pdf. For information on the Producer Price Index (PPI), see the section titled "Producer Price Index."

[11] The Northeast region consists of Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont. The Southeast region consists of Alabama, Florida, (continued...)

aggregates the retail prices advertised by major retail supermarket outlets in their weekly ad flyers; these prices reflect discount pricing (i.e., featured prices).[12] Data are reported for beef, chicken, dairy, eggs, goat, lamb, pork, specialty crops, turkey, and veal products.

One way that the AMS Market News retail feature data differ from the retail food data reported by BLS is that it is reported on a weekly schedule rather than a monthly schedule, allowing for nearly real-time tracking of retail price changes. The AMS data, however, may not be as readily aggregated and may contain reporting gaps.[13] As a result, the Market News retail reports may not be comprehensive for generalizing data nationally or for reporting data consistently over time.

In general, AMS's authority to collect and disseminate marketing data comes from the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1946 (7 U.S.C. §§1621 et seq.). According to USDA, the cost to the federal government of collecting and disseminating the Market News data series, which includes the retail features reports, was about $35 million per year between FY2021 and FY2025.[14]

Food Price Outlook

USDA ERS forecasts national food prices in its Food Price Outlook.[15] The consumer price forecasts reported in the Food Price Outlook are based on CPI data and other publicly available data sources. ERS forecasts the annual percentage change in food prices for the current calendar year.[16] Each July, ERS begins forecasting the annual percentage change in food prices for the next calendar year.[17] The Food Price Outlook data series is updated monthly following the release of CPI data.[18] ERS forecasts the annual percentage change for a selected group of food products, including beef and veal, pork, and other meats; poultry; fish and seafood; eggs; dairy products; fresh fruits; fresh vegetables; processed fruits and vegetables; sugar and sweets; cereal and bakery products; and nonalcoholic beverages.

Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. The Midwest region consists of Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. The South Central region consists of Arkansas, Colorado, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. The Southwest region consists of Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah. The Northwest region consists of Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming. The reports may also include Alaska and Hawaii.

[12] According to USDA, when it began reporting on retail prices in the early 2000s, many grocers had started posting weekly feature pricing ads online, and regular retail prices were more challenging to find online. In addition, the retail feature information correlated strongly with the existing USDA wholesale reporting; as such, USDA opted to report retail feature pricing data. Email from staff of the Livestock, Poultry, & Grain Market News, USDA, AMS, to CRS, April 25, 2025.

[13] If retail outlets are not running any featured pricing of a product or a group of products, then those items are excluded from the report.

[14] USDA, *2024 USDA Explanatory Notes–Agricultural Marketing Service*, https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/24-2024-AMS.pdf; USDA, *2025 USDA Explanatory Notes–Agricultural Marketing Service*, https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/23-AMS-2025-ExNotes.pdf; and USDA, *2026 USDA Explanatory Notes–Agricultural Marketing Service*, https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/23-2026-CJ-AMS.pdf.

[15] USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS), "Food Price Outlook," https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook.

[16] For example, ERS forecasts that annual prices for all food will increase by 3.2% in 2025. USDA, ERS, "Food Price Outlook: Changes in Consumer Price Indexes, 2022 through 2025," accessed March 25, 2025, https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook.

[17] In July 2025, ERS is expected to forecast the percentage change in food prices between 2025 and 2026.

[18] The ERS Food Price Outlook data are based in part on the BLS CPI for food data.

The Food Price Outlook forecasts food price inflation (i.e., the data are forward looking), whereas the CPI for food data and Market News retail feature data represent reported past prices.

Along with the downloadable Food Price Outlook datasets, ERS publishes an interactive visualization (often referred to as a "data dashboard") to illustrate aspects of the U.S. food price environment. In general, the ERS interactive visualizations use BLS CPI data, and ERS provides additional data narrative.[19]

According to USDA, the functions of ERS, including publishing the Food Price Outlook data series and other data series, come from the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1946 (7 U.S.C. §§1621-1627).[20] The USDA annual budget documents do not report information in enough detail to allow users to discern how much the federal government spent on estimating and reporting the Food Price Outlook data or other data series.

Food Expenditure Series[21]

ERS also publishes a Food Expenditure Series at the national and state levels. These data may be used to examine the value of food purchases, including food and beverage sales (as well as taxes and tips) and the value of food produced at home, donated, and furnished to employees and institutionalized persons. Additionally, these data include consumer expenditures on *food at home* and *food away from home* and annual food expenditure as a percentage of disposable personal income.[22] ERS does not collect the data published in the Food Expenditure Series. It calculates the estimates using data from the U.S. Census Bureau; administrative data from USDA's Food and Nutrition Service; ERS's Farm Income and Wealth Statistics; and the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES). The Food Expenditure Series has a one-year lag in reporting.[23]

According to USDA, the Food Expenditure Series can be used to "assess and track developments in consumer food purchasing behaviors and the food supply."[24] For example, these data could indicate shifts between consumers' habits of purchasing food at grocery stores and at restaurants. In contrast, the CPI for food, Market News retail feature data, and the Food Price Outlook track changes in retail food prices and do not account for changes in consumer behavior.

Along with the downloadable Food Expenditure Series datasets, ERS publishes an interactive visualization to illustrate aspects of national and state-level consumer food expenditures.[25] In general, the ERS interactive visualization uses data from the Food Expenditure Series dataset.

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[19] USDA, ERS, "Food Price Outlook - Food Price Environment: Interactive Visualization," accessed May 1, 2025, https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/food-price-environment-interactive-visualization.

[20] USDA, *2026 USDA Explanatory Notes–Economic Research Service*, https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/18-2026-CJ-ERS.pdf.

[21] USDA, ERS, "Food Expenditure Series," accessed July 1, 2025, https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-expenditure-series (hereinafter USDA, ERS, "Food Expenditure Series"). For information on ERS's authority for estimating and reporting data on consumer food spending and cost to the federal government for disseminating the Food Expenditure Series, see the section titled "Food Price Outlook."

[22] Examples of *food at home* include grocery stores; convenience stores; other food stores; warehouse clubs and supercenters; mail order and home delivery; direct selling by farmers, manufacturers, and wholesalers; and home production and donations. Examples of *food away from home* include full-service restaurants, limited-service restaurants, drinking places, hotels and motels, vending machines, recreational places, and schools and colleges.

[23] As of July 1, 2025, the ERS Food Expenditure Series datasets report data up to 2024.

[24] USDA, ERS, "Food Expenditure Series."

[25] USDA, ERS, "Food Expenditure Series - Interactive Charts: Food Expenditures," accessed May 23, 2025, https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-expenditure-series/interactive-charts-food-expenditures.

What Federal Data Sources Are Available to Compare U.S. Farm/Producer Prices and Food Retail Prices?

DOL and USDA collect and report data for the purpose of tracking and comparing prices at the farm, wholesale, and retail stages of the agricultural production and marketing chain (i.e., agricultural supply chain). DOL BLS collects data on prices received by domestic producers of goods and services, and USDA's AMS collects commodity and livestock data at terminal/wholesale, selected international markets, and farmers markets and auctions. ERS does not collect data. In general, the ERS data series report estimates use data collected by other federal entities. The four data sources that can be used to examine the value of agricultural products along the supply chain are

1. BLS's PPI;
2. AMS's Market News reports for commodities, livestock, and dairy;
3. ERS's Food Dollar Series; and
4. ERS's price spread data series.

Producer Price Index[26]

BLS's PPI is a measure of the average change over time in the selling prices domestic producers receive for their output.[27] Prices included in the PPI are from the first commercial transaction for many products and some services. The PPI measures a market basket consisting of the price of goods and services sold by domestic producers and thus can be used to analyze the revenue earned by the U.S. agricultural sector. In contrast, the CPI is designed to reflect the goods and services purchased by the typical household.

Market News for Commodities, Livestock, and Dairy[28]

In general, AMS collects the open ("spot") market sales price (i.e., the negotiated price or what is paid in the physical cash market) and volume in agricultural commodity and livestock markets. These data are published as part of Market News reports.[29] The Livestock and Dairy Market News contains mandatorily reported data on purchase prices and volume of cattle, hogs, sheep, and lamb, and sale price and volume of beef, pork, lamb, cheddar cheese, butter, nonfat dry milk, and dry whey.[30] Specialty crop market price data, in contrast, are voluntarily reported.[31]

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[26] For information on BLS's authority to collect data for and disseminate the PPI, see the section titled "Consumer Price Index Data Series."

[27] BLS, "Producer Price Indexes," https://www.bls.gov/ppi. Data are available from Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, "Farm Products," https://fred.stlouisfed.org/release/tables?rid=46&eid=142105#snid=142107.

[28] For information on AMS's authority to collect and disseminate agricultural market data and the cost to the federal government of collecting and disseminating the Market News data series, see the section titled "Market News Retail Feature Data."

[29] USDA, AMS, "USDA Market News," https://www.ams.usda.gov/market-news.

[30] For more information on AMS's Market News livestock data (excludes dairy products), see CRS Report R45777, *Livestock Mandatory Reporting Act: Overview for Reauthorization in the 116th Congress*.

[31] For more information on AMS's Specialty Crops Market News, see CRS Report R48213, *Marketing and Pricing in the U.S. Fruit and Vegetable Industry*.

USDA ERS Food Dollar Series[32]

ERS publishes the annual Food Dollar Series. This series includes estimates on how a typical $1 food purchase ("food dollar") of domestically produced food is distributed between the stages of the agricultural supply chain.[33] These data can be used to track the farm share (i.e., portion of the food dollar that goes to producers for the sales of their raw food commodities) and the distribution of value-added shares of each dollar spent on food over time.[34]

USDA ERS Price Spread Data Series[35]

ERS publishes two farm-to-consumer price spread data series: meat price spreads and price spreads from farm to consumer. These datasets provide measures of the difference between the retail prices consumers pay for food and the prices farmers receive for selling the corresponding commodities. The ERS farm-to-consumer price spread data series may be used to examine how changes in a commodity's farm value might affect its corresponding food retail price. The farm-to-consumer data series reports price spreads for selected individual foods (e.g., butter, ice cream, whole milk, and cheddar cheese, apples, grapes, broccoli, potatoes, white bread, and white flour) and groupings of foods.[36] Data for choice-grade steers, hogs, and broilers (i.e., meat chicken) are included in meat price spreads.[37] These data may indicate whether increases or decreases in the prices received by farmers for their commodity are partially or fully passed on to consumers without any changes in marketing costs.

Can Different Data Sources Affect Retail Food Price Trend Analysis?

Four federal data sources provide information on the U.S. retail food price environment, and each data source reports multiple measures that may provide a different snapshot of U.S. retail food prices and consumer spending (see "What Federal Data Sources Are Available to Track U.S. Retail Food Prices?"). Below are two figures illustrating how statistics calculated from these different data sources may lead to different conclusions. The first figure shows differences using all food and food-at-home data. The second figure shows differences using egg pricing data.

Comparing Food Price Changes Using DOL and USDA ERS Data

Figure 1 shows the annual percentage changes from the BLS CPI measures of U.S. food price inflation for all food and for food at home and the ERS measures of expenditures for total food and for total food at home. Although these four measures generally move in the same direction

[32] For information on ERS's authority for estimating and reporting data on the agricultural supply chain and the cost to the federal government for disseminating the Food Dollar Series, see the section titled "Food Price Outlook."

[33] USDA, ERS, "Food Dollar Series," https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-dollar-series.

[34] The ERS Food Dollar Series does not include commodity purchases as inputs by other farm business. An example of an excluded transaction is a cattle ranch purchasing hay from another farm. Patrick Canning, *A Revised and Expanded Food Dollar Series: A Better Understanding of Our Food Costs*, USDA, ERS, ERR-114, February 2011, https://ers.usda.gov/sites/default/files/_laserfiche/publications/44825/7759_err114.pdf?v=25757.

[35] For information on ERS's authority for estimating and reporting data on the agricultural supply chain and the cost to the federal government for disseminating the price spread data series, see the section titled "Food Price Outlook."

[36] USDA, ERS, "Price Spreads from Farm to Consumer," https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/price-spreads-from-farm-to-consumer.

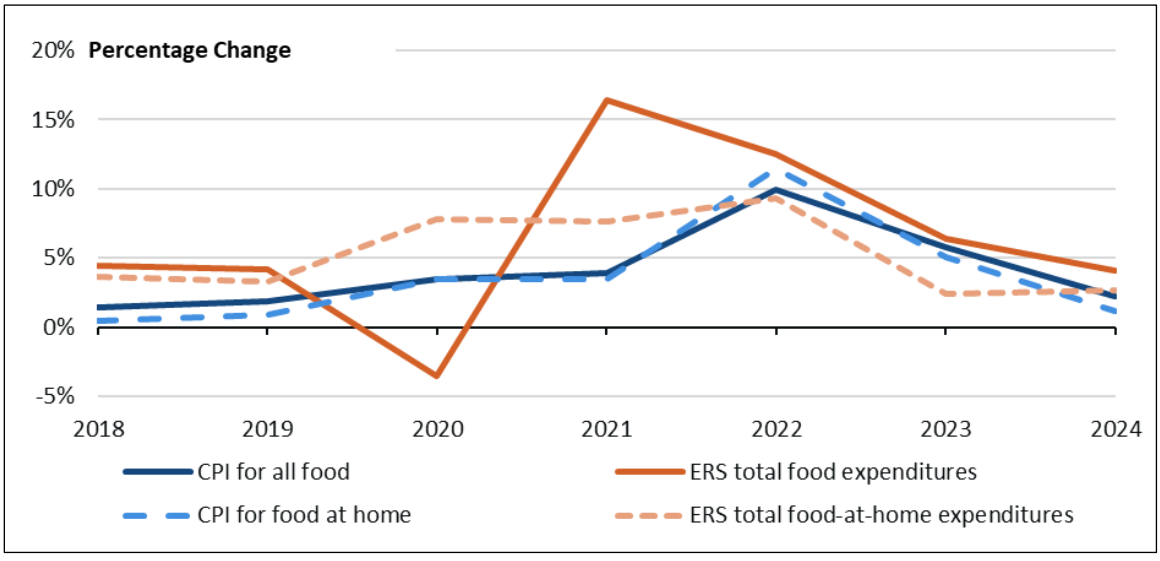
[37] USDA ERS, "Meat Price Spread," https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/meat-price-spreads.

(i.e., increasing or decreasing at the same time), the magnitudes of the annual percentage changes differ. For example, in 2021, according to BLS data, total food expenditures increased about 4%, and total expenditures on food at home increased about 3%. In contrast, according to USDA ERS data, the analogous changes in these expenditures were 16% and 8%, respectively.

The differences between the BLS and ERS data presented in **Figure 1** may be partly due to the different information captured in each dataset. The BLS CPI data for all food and food at home represent changes in food prices (i.e., food price inflation), whereas the ERS data for food and food-at-home expenditures represent consumer spending on food, which is a combination of food prices and quantities purchased. Thus, these datasets may provide a related but distinct piece of the U.S. food price story. For example, the CPI for all food and the CPI for food at home increased in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic because of supply chain issues. The ERS total food-at-home expenditures in 2020 may be partially explained by a combination of factors. In 2020, during to the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers switched from purchasing food at *food-away-from-home outlets*, such as restaurants, to purchasing food from *food-at-home outlets*, such as grocery retailers; this, coupled with the increase in the CPI for food at home, may in part explain the increase in total food-at-home expenditures in 2020.[38] Additionally, the decrease in ERS total food expenditures in 2020 may be partially explained by the decline in spending at food-away-from-home outlets, where food is typically more costly than at food-at-home outlets, offsetting the increased spending (combination of price and quantity) at the latter.

Figure 1. Annual Percentage Changes in U.S. Retail Food Prices from Different Sources

2018-2024



Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Consumer Price Index (CPI) for all food and food at home, accessed April 10, 2025; and CRS calculations using data from U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Economic Research Service (ERS), "Food Expenditure Series," accessed July 1, 2025.

Comparing Egg Price Changes Using DOL and USDA AMS Data

Figure 2 shows the monthly percentage change in the average feature price for a dozen grade A large white eggs using the AMS Weekly Retail Egg Feature Activity from February 2024 to

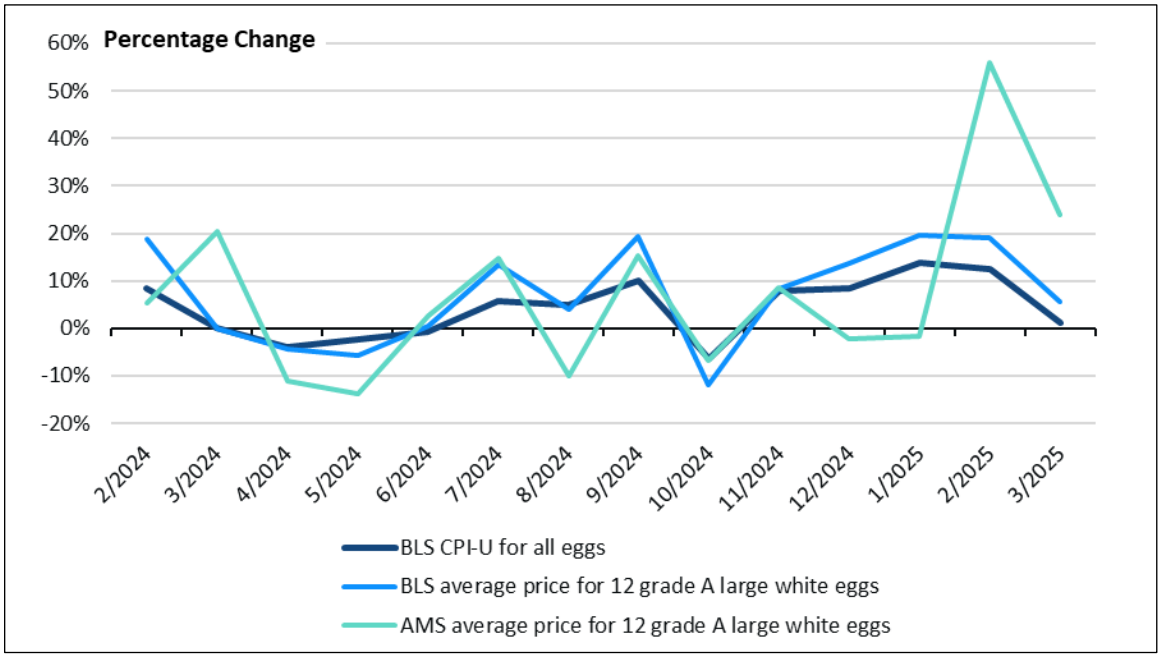
[38] For examples of food-at-home and food-away-from-home outlets, see footnote 22.

March 2025, as calculated by CRS; the BLS CPI-U ("U" is an abbreviation for all urban consumers) for all eggs; and the BLS average price for a dozen grade A large white eggs. During this period, there were four months in which the three retail egg price measures did not move in the same direction. In the other 10 months, the egg price measures moved in the same direction, but the magnitude of the monthly percentage varied across the measures. For example, in February 2025, according to BLS, the average price for a dozen grade A large white eggs increased 19%, the BLS CPI-U for all eggs increased 13%, and the average feature price for a dozen grade A large white eggs increased 56%.

The differences between the BLS and AMS data presented in **Figure 2** may be partly due to the different information captured in each dataset. The CRS calculations using the AMS retail features prices data can be particularly volatile and may not provide a full picture of the market. Pricing specials (e.g., "two for the price of one") are reported in the AMS retail feature prices data reports. Grocery stores may run such specials as part of their normal operation; however, during periods of limited supply (e.g., egg shortages during an avian influenza outbreak), grocery stores may not run egg-related pricing specials. This can lead to reporting gaps (i.e., no or reduced data) in the AMS weekly retail features pricing reports.

Figure 2. Monthly Percentage Changes in U.S. Retail Egg Prices from Different Sources

February 2024-March 2025



Source: BLS CPI for all urban consumers (CPI-U) for all eggs, updated April 10, 2025; CPI average data for dozen large eggs, accessed April 10, 2025; and USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), "Weekly Retail Egg Feature Activity," January 5, 2024-May 2, 2025.

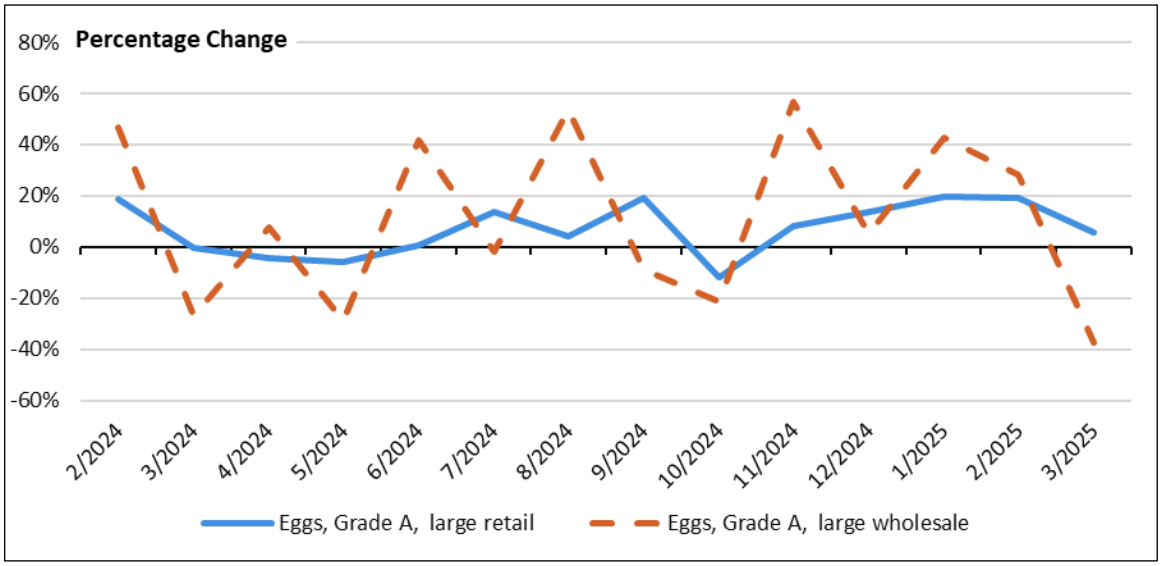
Note: CPI-U = Consumer Price Index for all urban consumers. The average price for 12 grade A large white eggs is based on AMS weekly retail egg features data, as calculated by CRS.

Can Using Retail Food Data or Wholesale Price Data Affect U.S. Food Price Trend Analysis?

Changes in prices paid for a commodity along the agricultural supply chain (e.g., wholesale prices) may not correspond to directional changes (i.e., increases or decreases) or changes of the same magnitude for the retail food product price. To illustrate this dynamic, **Figure 3** shows the monthly percentage change in the wholesale and retail prices of a dozen grade A large white eggs between February 2024 and March 2025. Out of the 14 months depicted, there were 4 months in which the wholesale and retail prices for eggs did not move in the same direction (e.g., the monthly wholesale egg price increased while the monthly retail egg price decreased). In three of these four months, wholesale egg prices decreased while retail egg prices increased. Potential factors contributing to such events include certain aspects of consumer behavior as well as store inventory management and retailing strategies.

Figure 3. Monthly Percentage Change in Egg Prices, Wholesale and Retail

February 2024-March 2025



Source: CRS calculations using data from USDA, ERS, "Meat Price Spreads," accessed April 17, 2025; and BLS CPI average data for dozen large eggs, accessed April 10, 2025.

Notes: Wholesale prices are the prices paid by the person or firm that buys products at wholesale. Retail prices are paid by consumers.

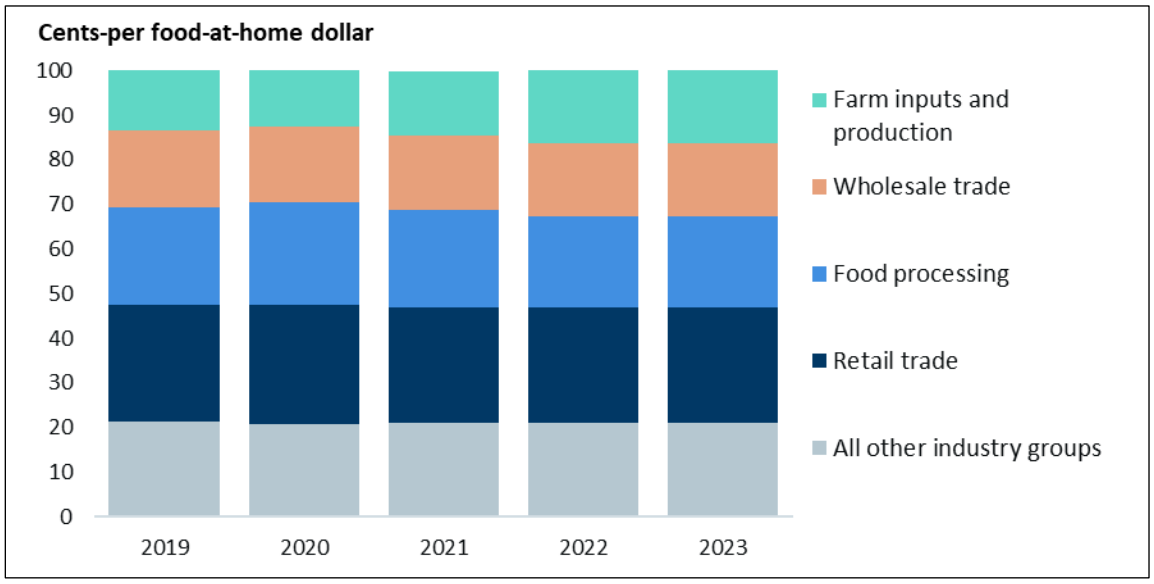
Can Using Retail Food Prices and Other Prices Along the Agricultural Supply Chain Affect Food Price Trend Analysis?

The agricultural supply chain involves multiple processes. Activities in some of these stages (e.g., production, manufacturing, processing, and packaging) transform agricultural commodities into

food products for human consumption.[39] For the agricultural supply chains that produce food for human consumption, the costs of food processing, wholesaling, and retailing generally account for a larger share of food prices than farm inputs and production costs.[40] **Figure 4** shows food processing, wholesaling, and retail costs accounted for about 63-67 cents per food-at-home dollar between 2019 and 2023, whereas the farm inputs and production costs accounted for about 13-16 cents per food-at-home dollar. USDA asserts that "food processing, wholesaling, and retailing costs generally account for a larger share of food prices than farm inputs (agribusiness) and production, the relationship between retail food prices and what farmers receive for their commodities can be theoretically and statistically weak."[41] In addition, changes in retail prices for less processed foods (e.g., cheddar cheese and all-purpose white flour) may be more correlated with farm-level price changes, compared with changes in retail prices for more highly processed products (e.g., white bread).[42]

Figure 4. Distribution of Food-at-Home Dollars Along the Agricultural Supply Chain

2019-2023



Source: CRS calculations using data from USDA, ERS, "Food Dollar Series," January 1, 2025.

Notes: "All other industry groups" includes transportation, packaging, advertising, energy, finance and insurance, food service, and legal and accounting. The food-at-home dollar represents how $1 of annual consumer food expenditures (a food dollar) on domestically produced purchases for eating at home is distributed among the industries in the agricultural supply chain.

According to research from the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, changes in agricultural commodity prices (i.e., the price producers received at the point of sale of a commodity) do not

[39] Agricultural commodities can be transformed into other products, such as ethanol and livestock feed.

[40] Wholesale prices are the prices paid by the person or firm that buys products at wholesale. Retail prices are paid by consumers.

[41] Megan Sweitzer et al., "ERS Data Products Show Food-at-Home Price Inflation from Producers to Consumers," USDA ERS, *Amber Waves*, July 10, 2023, https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2023/july/ers-data-products-show-food-at-home-price-inflation-from-producers-to-consumers (hereinafter Sweitzer et al., "ERS Data Products Show Food-at-Home Price Inflation").

[42] Sweitzer et al., "ERS Data Products Show Food-at-Home Price Inflation."

generally correspond to changes in retail food prices.[43] In addition, examining factors or changes in the agricultural supply chain that occur beyond the farm gate (e.g., food processing, packaging, and transportation) may provide a better understanding of food price inflation.[44]

How Do USDA Programs Affect U.S. Retail Food Prices?

Federal agencies generally do not have a direct role in controlling retail food prices or food price inflation.[45] Federal agencies typically target different aspects of the food economy, which may indirectly affect U.S. retail food prices and food price inflation. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) places federal agencies' efforts into four categories.[46] Below is a list of those four categories and corresponding examples of programs initiated or administered by USDA at the direction of Congress in each category.[47]

1. **Investment.** For example, Congress authorized farm safety net programs that provide financial assistance to agricultural producers impacted by natural disasters and poor market conditions.[48] Another example of such investment includes the USDA-initiated fertilizer production expansion program that created new incentives to increase domestic agricultural and fertilizer production.[49]
2. **Technical assistance.** For example, in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (P.L. 117-2), Congress provided USDA with broad authorities to support the food supply chain in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. USDA established the Meat and Poultry Processing Capacity-Technical Assistance Program, for example, "to expand and diversify processing capacity at local and regional levels."[50]
3. **Data and research.** For example, Congress authorized USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) to research a broad set of topics including efficient and sustainable food and fiber production, development of new products and uses for

[43] Francisco Scott et al., *The Passthrough of Agricultural Commodity Prices to Food Prices*, Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, Research Working Paper no. 24-16, December 2024, https://www.kansascityfed.org/documents/10638/rwp24-16scottlusomparodziewiczcowleydice.pdf (hereinafter Scott et al., *The Passthrough of Agricultural Commodity Prices to Food Prices*).

[44] Scott et al., *The Passthrough of Agricultural Commodity Prices to Food Prices*.

[45] Over the years, policymakers have taken several kinds of policy action to lower inflation. For more information, see CRS Report R47273, *Inflation in the U.S. Economy: Causes and Policy Options*.

[46] U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Food Prices: Information on Trends, Factors, and Federal Roles*, GAO-23-105846, May 2023, https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105846.pdf.

[47] Other aspects of federal policymaking—such as energy, transportation, and trade—may influence the supply, demand, and prices of food inputs and thereby impact short-term U.S. food price inflation.

[48] For more information about the suite of programs often referred to as the "farm safety net," see CRS In Focus IF12218, *Farm Bill Primer: Farm Safety Net Programs*.

[49] USDA created the Fertilizer Production Expansion Program using funds from the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) Charter Act. For more information about CCC, see CRS Report R44606, *The Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC)*.

[50] USDA, AMS, "Meat and Poultry Processing Capacity- Technical Assistance Program," July 2022, https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/MPPTAFactSheet.pdf.

agricultural commodities, and development of effective pest management controls.[51]

4. **Oversight.** For example, in June 2024, USDA published a rule amending regulations under the Packers and Stockyards Act of 1921 (7 U.S.C. §§181 et seq.).[52] According to USDA, "the proposed rule would define unfair practices as conduct that harms market participants and conduct that harms the market."[53]

Issues for Congress

The 119th Congress has debated policies and examined executive branch strategies related to U.S. retail food prices. Issues of potential congressional interest include U.S. food price inflation, the federal government's resources for collecting U.S. retail food price data, and consumer usability of the published federal U.S. retail food price data.[54]

U.S. Food Price Inflation

Congress generally does not have a direct role in controlling U.S. retail food prices or food price inflation.[55] Congress typically has enacted policies that target different aspects of the U.S. agricultural supply chain, such as research, production, food safety, and marketing. These policies may indirectly affect U.S. retail food prices. In the 119th Congress, over 40 bills have been introduced that, if enacted, would provide additional funding, technical assistance, research support, or oversight for USDA programs to address concerns or issues that may occur in the agricultural supply chain. Such policies may increase the flow of agricultural commodities through the supply chain, which may decrease retail food prices. Some of these bills, including the House-passed version of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (H.R. 1), would reauthorize and expand certain farm support programs (often referred to as "farm safety net programs") and would increase funding for animal research activities, among other things.[56]

Other policy considerations may include mechanisms for reducing farm costs, such as by providing funding for the USDA-initiated fertilizer production expansion program and similar programs that may decrease an agricultural producer's production costs. Congress may also consider mechanisms for providing assistance to smaller entities in the agricultural supply chain. One example could be providing funding for the Meat and Poultry Processing Expansion Program, which USDA created to expand independent, local meat and poultry processing

[51] For more information on federally funded agricultural research and data collection, see CRS Report R40819, *Agricultural Research: Background and Issues*.

[52] USDA has the authority—under the Packers and Stockyards Act of 1921 (7 U.S.C. §§181 et seq.)—to monitor, investigate, and regulate livestock and poultry markets to promote fair competition and to guard against deceptive and fraudulent trade practices.

[53] USDA, AMS, "Fair and Competitive Livestock and Poultry Markets," 89 *Federal Register* 53886, June 28, 2024. This proposed rule was withdrawn on January 16, 2025.

[54] For more about federal information technology (IT) issues, see CRS Report R46877, *Federal Information Technology (IT) Budgeting Process in the Executive Branch: An Overview*.

[55] For more information on the history of inflation in the United States since World War II and policies taken to address inflation, see CRS Report R47273, *Inflation in the U.S. Economy: Causes and Policy Options*.

[56] For more information on the farm support programs and miscellaneous programs that support agricultural- and related-sectors provisions in H.R. 1, see CRS Report R48574, *One Big Beautiful Bill Act (H.R. 1): Title I, Farm Safety Net and Miscellaneous Provisions*.

projects.[57] Covering the costs of such policy actions may involve appropriating additional funding or reallocating funding from existing areas. These policy options may require years to affect prices because they may take multiple years to implement, and their success may depend on the private sector to respond to incentives. Under some circumstances, these measures could lead to increased aggregate demand and higher retail prices given that the supply-and-demand factors that may affect fertilizer prices, and subsequently U.S. food prices, are complex. For example, there may be scenarios where increasing domestic production of fertilizer may increase global demand for fertilizer, particularly during periods of high commodity prices, thereby potentially increasing U.S. food prices.

Congress may also consider reviewing the executive branch's ongoing investigations into and efforts to address anticompetitive practices across the U.S. food and agriculture industry. Examples include work undertaken by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Department of Justice strike force on unfair and illegal pricing, FTC's analysis of grocery supply chain disruptions during the pandemic, and the FTC case brought against PepsiCo Inc.[58] Additionally, Congress may request or direct an agency to examine whether anticompetitive practices or consolidation within the industry might be affecting U.S. retail food prices.[59]

Collection of U.S. Retail Food Price Data

Although USDA AMS and DOL BLS have different missions and functions, these agencies have at least one shared goal: collecting and publishing U.S. retail food price information. As previously discussed, AMS collects data on U.S. retail feature prices (i.e., prices that reflect discount pricing) and not retail food prices. AMS's decision to collect retail feature prices, instead of or in addition to retail food prices, may be in part due to the staffing resources it has for data collection.[60] AMS publishes these data weekly.[61] BLS collects data on U.S. retail prices and publishes these data on a monthly basis. In addition, the BLS data has a one-month lag.[62] As such, the data reported by AMS and/or BLS may not meet the needs of a data user looking to examine real-time changes in U.S. retail food prices. Publishing data at more frequent intervals may allow data users to assess real-time changes in U.S. retail prices. In contrast, increasing the frequency at which AMS and/or BLS publish data may lead to data quality control issues. One potential quality control issue is the agencies' ability to collect a sufficient sample under short time constraints.

[57] USDA created the Fertilizer Production Expansion Program using funds from the CCC Charter Act. For more information about CCC, see CRS Report R44606, *The Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC)*. In the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (P.L. 117-2), Congress gave USDA the broad authority to provide assistance to the food supply chain and agriculture in response to the pandemic. One of the programs that USDA created using this authority and funding was the Meat and Poultry Processing Expansion Program. This program provided grants to eligible meat processing facilities to expand processing capacity for small and midsize meat and poultry processors.

[58] Federal Trade Commission (FTC), "FTC and Justice Department Host First Strike Force on Unfair and Illegal Pricing Meeting," press release, August 1, 2024, https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2024/08/ftc-justice-department-host-first-strike-force-unfair-illegal-pricing-meeting; FTC, "FTC Releases Report on Grocery Supply Chain Disruptions," press release, March 21, 2024, https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2024/03/ftc-releases-report-grocery-supply-chain-disruptions; and FTC, "FTC Sues PepsiCo for Rigging Soft Drink Competition," press release, January 17, 2025, https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2025/01/ftc-sues-pepsico-rigging-soft-drink-competition.

[59] For more information on federal antitrust statutes and their enforcement, see CRS In Focus IF11234, *Antitrust Law: An Introduction*.

[60] Email from staff of the Livestock, Poultry, & Grain Market News office of USDA, AMS, to CRS, April 25, 2025.

[61] For more information, see "Market News Retail Feature Data."

[62] For more information, see "Consumer Price Index Data Series."

Congress may consider whether multiple, sometimes conflicting, federal data sources reporting U.S. retail pricing and marketing information are needed and, if so, whether the agencies collecting and/or reporting such data have appropriate resources. Expanding data collection efforts such that agencies publish data more frequently (e.g., bimonthly instead of monthly) may enable data users to examine changes in U.S. retail prices closer to real time. The expansion of data collection would likely be costly (e.g., potentially reallocating funding from existing work or appropriating additional funding to cover the cost).

Congress may also consider the costs and benefits of having two federal agencies collecting and reporting U.S. retail food price data. Policy options that may be considered include examining potential overlap in AMS and BLS efforts or, more broadly, the federal government's role in collecting and publishing U.S. retail food price data. Numerous studies and press reports have highlighted the importance of public data collection to assess alternative policy and administrative options, as well as to conduct empirical analysis.[63] However, there are private entities collecting proprietary data on U.S. retail food price data. The potential budgetary impacts of such policy options are unclear.

Consumer Usability of U.S. Retail Food Price Data

BLS and ERS create data visualizations for CPI data, the Food Price Outlook, and the Food Expenditure Series. These data visualizations provide a curated narrative using a selected set of the respective datasets and may improve and support data-driven decisionmaking. AMS has not created data visualizations for the Market News retail feature price data. Congress may consider whether to retain, increase, or decrease resources that may modernize or upgrade the delivery of U.S. retail food price data analytics and visualization efforts at BLS, ERS, and AMS.[64] Increasing such resources is likely to incur a cost and may involve reallocating funding from existing work or appropriating additional funding to cover the cost. Congress may also consider the potential for BLS and ERS to create one data visualization based on the CPI and Food Price Outlook data. The potential administrative challenges, staffing burden, and budget effects of such a policy are unclear.

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[63] See, for example, Nicholas Eberstadt et al., *"In Order That They Might Rest Their Arguments on Facts": The Vital Role of Government-Collected Data*, Hamilton Project and American Enterprise Institute, March 2017, https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/THP_GovDataFacts_0317_Fixed.pdf?x85095; "Government Data Are Ever More Important to Economic Research," *The Economist*, May 26, 2018, https://www.economist.com/international/2018/05/26/government-data-are-ever-more-important-to-economic-research; and Clare Malone, "How Trump's White House Could Mess with Government Data." FiveThirtyEight, December 15, 2016, https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-trumps-white-house-could-mess-with-government-data/ (archived site).

[64] For more information on congressional and executive branch actions on federal IT budgetary reporting, see CRS Report R48049, *Information Technology Spending in the President's Budget Submission for FY2025: In Brief*.

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