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Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR): An Overview

Introduction

Child nutrition reauthorization (CNR) refers to Congress's process of making changes to the permanent statutes that authorize the child nutrition programs, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and related activities:

- the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act,
- the Child Nutrition Act of 1966, and
- (less often) Section 32 of the Act of August 24, 1935, which transfers funds to the child nutrition programs annually.

The most recent CNR was the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-296). Some of the authorities created or extended in that law expired on September 30, 2015. However, the vast majority of program operations have continued with funding provided by appropriations acts.

Programs Typically Included in CNR

CNR has historically included WIC, the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP), and the following child nutrition programs:

- National School Lunch Program (NSLP);
- School Breakfast Program (SBP);
- Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP);
- Summer Food Service Program (SFSP); and
- Special Milk Program (SMP).

CNR also covers a number of smaller grant programs and support activities, such as the Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program and funding for states' administrative expenses associated with operating certain programs.

Table 1 provides a short description of each of the main child nutrition programs and WIC.

Related Policies in the Farm Bill

The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP), authorized in the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, has been amended by both CNR and farm bills, including the 2004 CNR and farm bills in 2008 and 2014. The 2010 CNR and the 2018 farm bill did not amend FFVP.

In addition, farm bills sometimes include provisions related to food purchasing and distribution in child nutrition programs. The 2018 farm bill (P.L. 115-334), the most recent farm bill, extended funding for USDA's purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables for child nutrition programs and required USDA to enforce "Buy American" (domestic purchasing) rules for schools participating in NSLP/SBP.

Last Reauthorization

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-296) included a number of new and revised policies. For example, the law created the Community Eligibility Provision, an option within NSLP/SBP that allows eligible schools to provide free meals to all students. The law also required USDA to update the nutrition standards for school meals and establish nutrition standards for other foods sold in schools during the school day. For WIC, the law included the requirement that states transition, by October 1, 2020, from their primarily paper voucher-based WIC benefits to Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT). In some cases, the new policies were described within the statute; in other cases, the details were laid out in USDA-promulgated regulations.

Reauthorization Efforts

During the 117th Congress, the House Education and Labor Committee reported a CNR bill (H.R. 8450) out of committee. The Congress ended without further action on the bill. Also during the 117th Congress, a permanent Summer EBT program was enacted in the FY2023 appropriations act (P.L. 117-328). Previously, during the 114th Congress the committees exercising jurisdiction reported CNR bills but reauthorization was not completed (see CRS Report R44373, *Tracking Child Nutrition Reauthorization in the 114th Congress: An Overview*).

Categorization of Programs' Funding

Most of the WIC and child nutrition programs' funding requires annual appropriations:

- Most child nutrition program funding is appropriated mandatory spending based on formulas and criteria in the authorizing laws (e.g., the programs' per-meal reimbursements).
- Some smaller child nutrition grants and activities (e.g., Team Nutrition) are funded with discretionary appropriations.
- WIC and WIC FMNP funds are discretionary.

Have the Programs Expired?

Many child nutrition programs are permanently authorized and have permanent authorizations of appropriations (they have no expiration date). This is the case for the main functions of NSLP, SBP, CACFP, and SMP.

In other cases—such as SFSP, WIC, WIC FMNP, and funding for states' administrative expenses—the authority for the programs themselves is permanent, but their authorizations of appropriations expired on September 30, 2015. In such cases, the programs and activities may still operate if funding is provided in appropriations acts, which has been the case in each of FY2016 through FY2026.

A few pilot programs and activities expired on September 30, 2015, and were not always extended. A California program to provide SFSP snacks year-round was not extended. USDA's authority to conduct food safety audits and funding for a National Hunger Clearinghouse was not extended in FY2016 but was subsequently extended by appropriations acts in each of FY2017 through FY2026.

Table 1. Child Nutrition and WIC Programs at a Glance

Program	Authorizing Statute (Year Authorized)	Description	FY2025 Expenditures	FY2025 Participants
National School Lunch Program (NSLP)	Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (1946)	Provides federal reimbursements for lunches served in participating pre-K-12 schools. Options for schools to provide afterschool snacks and summer lunches.	$18.9 billion	30.0 million (daily average)[a]
School Breakfast Program (SBP)	Child Nutrition Act (1966)	Provides reimbursements for breakfasts served in participating schools. Option for schools to provide summer breakfasts.	$6.1 billion	15.7 million (daily average)[a]
Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)	Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (1968)	Provides reimbursements for meals and snacks in child care centers, day care homes, and adult day care centers. Rules and funding differ based on type of institution.	$4.3 billion	4.8 million (daily average)[a]
Special Milk Program (SMP)	Child Nutrition Act (1954)	Provides reimbursements for milk in schools and institutions that do not participate in other child nutrition programs.	$4.2 million	65,400 half-pints served on average daily[b]
Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)	Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (1968)	Provides reimbursements for meals and snacks served by schools and nonprofit organizations during the summer. Eligibility rules vary by type of meal site and location.	$739.9 million	1.7 million (daily average over summer months)[a,c]
Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer Program for Children (Summer EBT)	Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (2022)	Provides electronic benefits that households with eligible school-age children can redeem for groceries during the summer months.	$2.4 billion	5.4 million (monthly average over summer months)[c]
Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)	Child Nutrition Act (1974)	Provides benefits redeemable for supplemental foods as well as nutrition counseling and breastfeeding support to pregnant/breastfeeding/postpartum women, infants, and children (under five years old).	$7.6 billion (FY2025 appropriations)	6.9 million (monthly average)
WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (WIC FMNP)	Child Nutrition Act (1992)	Provides vouchers for WIC participants to redeem at farmers' markets.	$10.0 million (FY2025 appropriations)	1.0 million (FY2025 total)
Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program	Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (2010)	Competitive grants and technical assistance to schools and local organizations for agricultural education and local food purchases.	$16.7 million (FY2025 available funding)	Not available
Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP)	Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (2002)	Provides funding for fresh fruit and vegetable snacks in elementary schools, with priority for low-income schools.	$231.5 million (FY2025 allocation to states)[d]	Not available

Source: Except as noted, rounded FY2025 participation and spending data from U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Administration (FNA), "July 2026 Keydata Report," October 20, 2026. WIC and WIC FMNP FY2025 appropriations from P.L. 119-4. WIC FMNP data from USDA, FNA, "WIC FMNP FY 2025 Profile," https://www.fna.usda.gov/fmnp/profiles-grants-participation.

Notes:

a. USDA estimates average daily participation based on the number of meals served.
b. Estimated by CRS based on the average number of half pints served per month divided by an estimated 20 operating days per month.
c. CRS-calculated average from May through August.
d. Includes carryover funds from FY2024. USDA, FNA, "FFVP: Allocation of Funds for Fiscal Year 2025," SP 21-2024, May 20, 2024.

CRS Reports for Further Information

CRS Report R42353, *Domestic Food Assistance: Summary of Programs*

CRS Report R46234, *School Meals and Other Child Nutrition Programs: Background and Funding*

CRS Report R44115, *A Primer on WIC: The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children*

CRS Report R41354, *Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization: P.L. 111-296*

CRS In Focus IF12193, *Farm and Food Support Under USDA's Section 32 Account*

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