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The School Foodservice Workforce: Characteristics and Labor Market Outcomes

July 27, 2022

Congressional Research Service

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R47199



The School Foodservice Workforce: Characteristics and Labor Market Outcomes

In 2019, an estimated 339,000 workers were employed in foodservice operations in the nation's elementary and secondary schools. While news stories often focus on so-called *lunch ladies*, the school foodservice workforce encompasses employees ranging from front-line cafeteria workers to chefs and food preparation staff to administrators and managers. Such workers have a variety of skills and educational backgrounds and differ in their labor market outcomes.

Federal funding and policies have affected the trajectory of the school foodservice workforce over time. While early school food programs in the United States were started locally, the introduction of federal funding in the 1930s led to an expansion and professionalization of the workforce, which was (and remains) comprised largely of women. Federal funding for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was made permanent in 1946 and, together with funding for the School Breakfast Program (SBP), now provides the bulk of school foodservice departments' budgets.

This report details the history of the school foodservice labor force and policy shifts that have affected the workforce over time, including a recent trend toward outsourcing. It provides an overview of school foodservice positions, budgets, and operations, and the federal laws, policies, and funding streams applicable to the workforce, including labor laws and funding for workforce training. It also presents original estimates of the characteristics and labor market outcomes of public-sector school foodservice workers using American Community Survey (ACS) data from 2015 to 2019, finding the following for such workers:

- They were more likely to be female compared to the general workforce (94% vs. 42%), older (mean age of 50 vs. 42), Hispanic (21% vs. 17%), and Black (18% vs. 12%). Their most common level of education completed was high school (51%), followed by some college (22%).
- They were most likely to work full-time hours (defined as working 30 or more hours per week) (70%), but a sizable proportion (30%) worked part-time.
- They had median annual earnings of approximately \$15,300 (ranging from \$10,000 for part-time workers to \$18,773 for full-time workers). One in ten workers had family incomes at or below the federal poverty line and 16% received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. Nearly three-quarters had employer-sponsored health insurance, while the remainder had public health insurance or were uninsured.

The data show that school foodservice workers were not a monolithic group. For example, public school foodservice managers had higher levels of education, were more likely to work full-time, had higher salaries, and were more likely to be White and male compared to other types of school foodservice staff.

This analysis is limited to information collected in the ACS, a nationally representative survey. Prior qualitative research has found that school foodservice workers, particularly frontline staff, tend to be emotionally invested in the children they serve, which can lead to both fulfillment and burnout. There is a lack of research on whether such workers experience seasonal changes in employment, are paid for required training, and have opportunities for advancement.

The findings in this report may be of interest to federal policymakers as they consider amendments to NSLP and SBP. Labor costs comprise nearly half of federal spending on meal reimbursements—the primary source of funding for the school meals programs. In addition, the school meals programs include specific funding to support training for school foodservice workers and hiring standards for school nutrition directors, which Congress may examine. This workforce is also responsible for implementing reforms in the school meals programs, such as updated nutrition standards for school meals.

R47199

July 27, 2022

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Introduction

School cafeteria workers have made the news in recent years for reasons ranging from “heroic” efforts to continue serving meals to children during the COVID-19 pandemic to “lunch shaming” children who are not able to pay for their meal at checkout.¹ According to scholars, this is unsurprising: lunch ladies have historically been cast in both positive and negative lights.² The term *lunch ladies* itself has various connotations, and has been both embraced and rejected by individuals who work as frontline cafeteria staff.³ For one, it emphasizes the gendered nature of the workforce (discussed in the history presented in the **Appendix** of this report)—a dynamic that mirrors other care-related professions.⁴

A perennial focus on frontline cafeteria workers masks the broader workforce involved in feeding children during the school day, which includes managers and administrators, dietitians, chefs and food preparation staff, dishwashing staff, warehouse workers, and drivers, as well as the frontline servers and cashiers who are more visible in the school lunch line. Many of these are public sector jobs but some positions are privatized in certain school districts.

The federal government invests roughly \$20 billion annually in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP)—collectively referred to as the *school meals programs*.⁵ Enacted and proposed reforms to the school meals programs have largely centered on topics such as the sourcing and quality of food and meals, program administration, and eligibility rules for students, rather than the school foodservice workforce. However, as school nutrition staff underlie the functioning of these systems, and nearly half of federal school meal reimbursements go toward labor costs,⁶ Congress might consider issues such as whether school foodservice departments are attracting and retaining talent and whether workers have the appropriate skills to implement federal reforms. There might also be interest in examining compensation, workplace safety, and labor standards more generally for such workers.⁷ In addition, Congress might examine current policies that directly affect school nutrition workers, including hiring standards and annual training requirements added by the 2010 reauthorization of child nutrition programs.

¹ For example, see Elizabeth Dunn, “These Unsung Heroes of Public School Kitchens Have Fed Millions,” *New York Times*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/15/nyregion/coronavirus-nyc-schools-cafeterias.html> and Bettina Elias Siegel, “Shaming Children So Parents Will Pay the School Lunch Bill,” *New York Times*, April 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/30/well/family/lunch-shaming-children-parents-school-bills.html>.

² Jennifer E. Gaddis, *The Labor of Lunch* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), p. 138.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁴ For example, see M. Duffy, “Doing the Dirty Work: Gender, Race, and Reproductive Labor in Historical Perspective,” *Gender and Society* (2007) vol. 21 no. 3, pp. 313–336. Researchers have found that care-oriented work, particularly caregiving work considered less interpersonal, is typically lower-paid.

⁵ CRS calculations based on U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), “2023 USDA Explanatory Notes – Food and Nutrition Service,” March 28, 2022, <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/35-2023-FNS.pdf>. This estimate includes activities that support the programs.

⁶ Labor costs represent 45% of average school foodservice account spending according to USDA, FNS, Office of Policy Support, *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, Final Report Volume 3: School Meal Costs and Revenues*, April 2019, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNMCS-Volume3>.

⁷ For example, see White House Task Force on Worker Organization and Empowerment, *Report to the President*, February 2022, p. 35, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/White-House-Task-Force-on-Worker-Organizing-and-Empowerment-Report.pdf>.

In addition to providing context for consideration of these issues, this report is meant to fill a gap in the research by presenting descriptive statistics on the characteristics and labor market outcomes of school foodservice workers using American Community Survey (ACS) data from 2015 to 2019.

Defining the School Foodservice Workforce

This report defines the *school foodservice workforce* or *school nutrition workforce* (used interchangeably) as the school and district-level staff directly involved in administering school food programs and preparing and serving school meals, including both public and private-sector employees. It does not include other workers involved in school food production, such as those employed by school food suppliers and manufacturers. The data presented in this report (see the “Characteristics of Public School Foodservice Workers” section) are specific to public sector school foodservice workers, but some comparisons with private school foodservice workers are presented in **Table 8**.

There were roughly 130,000 public and private elementary and secondary schools nationwide as of school year 2017-2018 (the most recent official figure).⁸ Most of these schools have some form of food service, though the scale and nature of such operations differs widely.⁹ For example, some school districts prepare meals at a central kitchen and distribute them to schools; in other cases, schools prepare meals onsite. Other schools and districts contract with private vendors to prepare and/or serve meals.

While individual schools and districts have significant discretion in deciding whether and how to operate a foodservice program, not everything is locally determined.¹⁰ Schools and *school food authorities (SFAs)*¹¹ participating in the federal school meals programs must comply with federal requirements, including nutritional requirements for meals and hiring standards and training requirements for staff (discussed further in the “School Meals Program Laws and Policies” section). The federal programs also establish rules around when and how school foodservice departments can contract with private companies to provide school meal labor and services (discussed further in the “Outsourcing” section). The majority of public schools and a minority of private schools nationwide participate in the school meals programs; as of fall 2019 (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic), nearly 90,000 public schools and 4,600 private schools participated in NSLP.¹²

⁸ U.S. Department of Education (ED), National Center on Education Statistics (NCES), “Table 214.10. Number of public school districts and public and private elementary and secondary schools: Selected years, 1869-70 through 2018-19,” September 2020, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_214.10.asp.

⁹ Almost all (98%) of public elementary schools offered food services in the cafeteria or lunchroom in 2005, according to B. Parsad and L. Lewis, *Calories In, Calories Out: Food and Exercise in Public Elementary Schools, 2005* (NCES 2006-057), ED, NCES, May 2006, pp. 5-6, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006057.pdf>.

¹⁰ States may also establish requirements around school food service.

¹¹ Federal regulations designate school food authorities as the local authorities in charge of operating the school meal programs; typically, these are foodservice departments within school districts.

¹² USDA FNS, “March Keydata Report (November 2020 data),” March 12, 2021, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/data/march-keydata-report-november-2020-data> and CRS communication with FNS in March 2021. This compares to 98,469 public schools as of 2019-2020 and 30,490 private schools nationwide as of fall 2019, according to ED, NCES, Digest of Education Statistics: 2021, “Table 216.10. Number of public elementary and secondary schools, by school level, type, and charter, magnet, and virtual status: 2009-10 through 2019-20” and “Table 205.40. Number and percentage distribution of private elementary and secondary students, teachers, and schools, by orientation of school and selected characteristics: Fall 2009, fall 2017, and fall 2019.”

Not all of the research and data presented in this report is specific to workers in SFAs operating the federal school meals programs, though such SFAs represent the majority of schools and districts nationwide.

Key Terms Used in This Report

School foodservice workforce or *school nutrition workforce* broadly refers to public and private sector employees who implement school food programs within public and private elementary and secondary schools and school districts (not necessarily limited to districts participating in NSLP and SBP, though most districts do).

School food authority (SFA) is a term specific to federal school meals programs (NSLP and SBP), referring to the local entity that participates in and implements the programs. These are often foodservice departments of school districts, though some schools (such as private schools) may operate as their own SFA.

Types of Positions

Federal school meal program regulations¹³ broadly define three types of school nutrition staff:

School nutrition program directors are those individuals directly responsible for the management of the day-to-day operations of school food service for all participating schools under the jurisdiction of the school food authority.

School nutrition program managers are those individuals directly responsible for the management of the day-to-day operations of school food service for a participating school(s).

School nutrition program staff are those individuals, without managerial responsibilities, involved in day-to-day operations of school food service for a participating school(s).

The School Nutrition Association (SNA), a membership and advocacy organization for school nutrition professionals, created a more detailed taxonomy of school foodservice positions based on a 2019 survey, as shown in **Table 1**. Not all schools and districts employ every position listed; for example, not all districts have a central kitchen/central kitchen manager. In other cases, there might be more than one employee per position; for example, the survey found a median of 15 full-time and 19 part-time foodservice assistants per district.¹⁴ In addition, **Table 1** may not accurately depict every employee's place of work; for example, in districts with a central kitchen, cooks and foodservice assistants would likely work at the district level rather than the school level.

The research and estimates presented in this report pertain to different positions (as noted throughout). For example, some studies examine the experiences of frontline cafeteria workers, while others describe managerial and director-level staff. The ACS estimates in this report are limited to public sector school foodservice occupations that can be identified in ACS data using standardized occupational codes, and exclude some positions such as cashiers, drivers, and certain district-level administrative staff.

In addition to paid employees, school foodservice departments also sometimes utilize volunteers (who are not included in the estimates in this report).¹⁵

¹³ 7 C.F.R. §210.2.

¹⁴ SNA, *2020 Compensation and Benefits Report*, March 11, 2020, p. 50.

¹⁵ For example, see USDA, FNS, "COVID-19 School Meal Spotlights," March 2, 2021, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/covid-19-school-meal-spotlights>, The Lunch Box, "Volunteers and Interns," <https://www.thelunchbox.org/lunchroom-education/volunteers-interns>, and Foodservice Director, "School nutrition team asks for volunteers to combat staffing shortages," November 15, 2021, <https://www.foodservicedirector.com/workforce/school-district-nutrition-team-asks-volunteers-combat-staffing-shortages>.

Table 1. Types of School Foodservice Positions

As Defined by the School Nutrition Association

Position Title (Alternative Titles)	Responsibilities
District-Level Positions	
School Nutrition Director (School Foodservice Director, Child Nutrition Director)	Responsible for overseeing all aspects of school nutrition operations in a school district. This position often reports to the district superintendent and/or the school board.
Assistant Director (School Nutrition Supervisor, Area Supervisor)	Assists the director in managing school nutrition operations in a school district.
School Nutrition Coordinator	Assists the assistant director.
Administrative Assistant (Secretary)	Performs a variety of administrative functions for an individual or a single department.
Registered Dietician (Nutritionist)	Responsible for nutritional analysis, menu development, compliance with federal and state nutrition regulations, recipe entry and documentation, and nutrition counseling.
Executive Chef (District Chef)	Responsible for menu planning, recipe development, culinary training, and student taste-testing initiatives.
Central Kitchen Manager (Production Manager, Foodservice Specialist)	Responsible for the day-to-day management of a central kitchen.
Warehouse Manager (Warehouse Supervisor)	Responsible for managing inventory in a school nutrition warehouse.
School-Level Positions	
Manager (Cafeteria Manager, Foodservice Manager)	Responsible for the day-to-day management of foodservice operations in an individual school.
Assistant Manager (Coordinator)	Assists the manager.
Head Cook (Cook)	Serves as the head cook for a cafeteria in an individual school.
Foodservice Assistant (School Nutrition Assistant, Server)	Preps and serves food in a cafeteria in an individual school.
Cashier	Primary responsibility is cashier but may perform other cafeteria duties.
Dishwasher	Primary responsibility is dishwasher but may perform other cafeteria duties.
Driver	Delivers/picks up food and non-food items to/from locations within and outside of the district.

Source: Adapted from SNA, *2020 Compensation and Benefits Report*, March 11, 2020.

Outsourcing

USDA regulations allow SFAs to outsource certain aspects of their school meals operations, including procurement, food preparation, and food service, to a foodservice management company (e.g., larger companies include Aramark, Chartwells/Compass Group, and Sodexo).¹⁶ For example, a district may contract with a private company only to prepare and deliver meals to schools, or the contract may involve the company serving meals to students onsite as well. Outsourced foodservice employees may therefore include administrative, food preparation, and/or frontline cafeteria staff. A nationally representative USDA survey in school year 2014-2015 found that in public SFAs that used foodservice management companies, 73% delegated preparing meals, 57% delegated serving meals, and 51% delegated food procurement to the company.¹⁷

However, school meals program regulations require that SFAs retain general control over the operation of NSLP and SBP, including managing finances and complying with state and federal requirements.¹⁸ Therefore, some district-level foodservice staff are still necessary in a district that chooses to outsource its foodservice operation.

Roughly one-quarter of SFAs outsource at least one aspect of their foodservice operation. Specifically, a nationally representative survey conducted by USDA in school year 2016-2017 found that 26.2% of public SFAs used a foodservice management company.¹⁹ Another nationally representative survey conducted by USDA found a foodservice management company usage rate of 19.7% among public SFAs in school year 2014-2015. This survey also found that foodservice management company use was higher among larger school districts, urban and suburban districts, districts with lower poverty rates, and districts in the Mid-Atlantic and Midwest.²⁰

Data indicate that the rate of school foodservice outsourcing has increased over time. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) School Health Policies and Practices Study found an increase in the percentage of public school districts that reported using foodservice management companies from school year 2011-2012 (16.4%) to 2015-2016 (19.9%).²¹ Older data reported by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) showed a foodservice management company usage rate of 4% in school year 1987-1988 and 8% in school year 1994-1995 among all public and private SFAs.²² These rates are shown in **Table 2**.

There is limited research examining the shift to higher rates of outsourcing within school foodservice departments and the implications for employees (the latter topic is discussed briefly

¹⁶ 7 C.F.R. §210.16 and USDA, FNS, "Contracting with Food Service Management Companies: Guidance for School Food Authorities," May 2016, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/updated-guidance-contracting-food-service-management>.

¹⁷ USDA, FNS, Office of Policy Support, *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, Final Report Volume 1: School Meal Program Operations and School Nutrition Environments*, prepared by Mathematica Policy Research and Abt Associates, April 2019, p. A.59, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNMCS-Volume1.pdf>.

¹⁸ 7 C.F.R. §210.16.

¹⁹ USDA, FNS, *Study of School Food Authority Procurement Practices*, prepared by 2M Research, September 22, 2021, p. 44, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/study-school-food-authority-procurement-practices>.

²⁰ USDA, FNS, Office of Policy Support, *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, Final Report Volume 1: School Meal Program Operations and School Nutrition Environments*, prepared by Mathematica Policy Research and Abt Associates, April 2019, p. 36, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNMCS-Volume1.pdf>.

²¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "School Health Policies and Practices Study 2016," p. 25, https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/shpps/pdf/shpps-results_2016.pdf and CDC, "School Health Policies and Practices Study 2012," 2013, p. 83, https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/shpps/pdf/shpps-results_2012.pdf.

²² U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), "School Lunch Program: Role and Impacts of Private Food Service Companies," August 1996, p. 22, <https://www.gao.gov/products/rced-96-217>.

in the “Existing Research on the School Foodservice Workforce” section). USDA started allowing the use of foodservice management companies in 1970 in response to school meal budget shortfalls, among other factors.²³ It is unclear what has driven the rise in usage since then. Among public SFAs that contracted with foodservice management companies in school year 2016-2017, common reasons included perceived cost savings as a result of increased purchasing power, reductions in administrative burdens (including in overseeing staff), and improved compliance with federal and state regulations.²⁴ A study conducted in 2014 found that the top benefits of outsourcing cited by school administrators included access to skills and talent, quality improvement, quality of taste, nutritional quality of food, and reduced operating costs, and the top costs included poor performance, lack of student/parent support, poor contract/partner selection, unrealized savings/hidden costs, and low morale of staff.²⁵

Table 2. Foodservice Management Company Use by Public School Districts for Selected School Years

School Year	Percentage of Public School Districts Using a Foodservice Management Company
2016-2017 ^a	26.2%
2015-2016 ^b	19.9%
2014-2015 ^c	19.7%
2011-2012 ^b	16.4%
1994-1995 ^d	8%
1987-1988 ^d	4%

Source: CRS, based on the studies cited below.

- a. USDA, FNS, *Study of School Food Authority Procurement Practices*, prepared by 2M Research, September 22, 2021, p. 44, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/study-school-food-authority-procurement-practices>.
- b. CDC, *School Health Policies and Practices Study 2016*, p. 25, https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/shpps/pdf/shpps-results_2016.pdf and CDC, *School Health Policies and Practices Study 2012, 2013*, p. 83, https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/shpps/pdf/shpps-results_2012.pdf.
- c. USDA, FNS, Office of Policy Support, *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, Final Report Volume 1: School Meal Program Operations and School Nutrition Environments*, prepared by Mathematica Policy Research and Abt Associates, April 2019, p. 36, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNMCS-Volumel.pdf>.
- d. GAO, *School Lunch Program: Role and Impacts of Private Food Service Companies*, August 1996, p. 22, <https://www.gao.gov/products/rced-96-217>.

²³ Susan Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America’s Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 154-161; and Kate Beem, “Hot Potato in the School Cafeteria: More districts outsource their food services, but some raise questions about personnel relations and savings,” *The School Superintendents Association*, <https://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=14122>.

²⁴ USDA, FNS, *Study of School Food Authority Procurement Practices*, prepared by 2M Research, September 22, 2021, pp. 44-46, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/study-school-food-authority-procurement-practices>.

²⁵ A. Sharma et al., “Cost–benefit framework for K-12 foodservice outsourcing decisions,” *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, vol. 45 (2015), pp. 69-72.

Who Covers School Foodservice Labor Costs?

Nearly all school nutrition staff are paid out of the school district's foodservice budget as opposed to the district's general fund.²⁶ Keeping school foodservice accounts separate helps federally funded programs maintain compliance with federal regulations that govern school meal funds.²⁷ It also reflects an ethos that school foodservice operations be self-sustaining, which dates back to the inception of school feeding programs (discussed in the **Appendix**). However, the school district general fund may cover or partially cover certain costs, such as cafeteria utilities and custodial services, and foodservice losses.²⁸

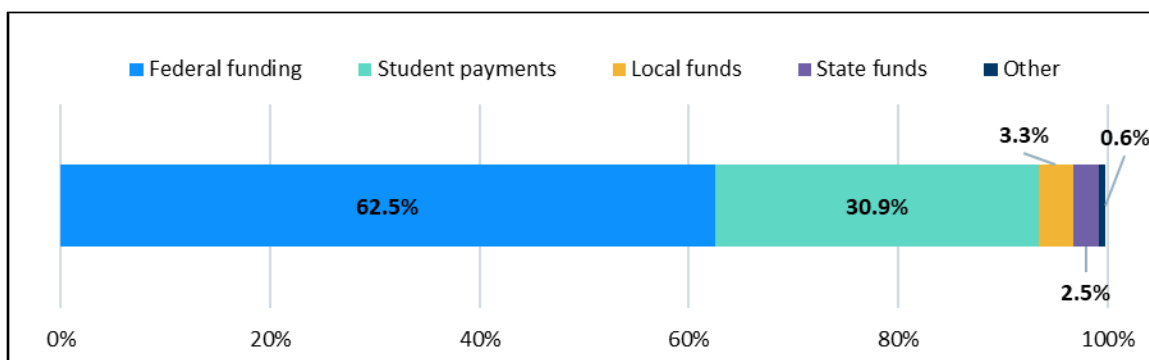
School districts' foodservice budgets are funded largely by federal reimbursements for meals and student payments for meals and snacks (see **Figure 1**).²⁹ As such, school foodservice worker wages, benefits, and employment prospects are typically more dependent on federal funding and student purchases than state, local, and district budgets. Federal funding for school meals is calculated on a per-meal reimbursement basis. Therefore, funding is subject to fluctuations in student participation in school meals. The textbox "SFA Finances and Staffing During the COVID-19 Pandemic" (below) provides examples of how changes in meal participation during the COVID-19 pandemic, among many other factors, affected federal funding, school food authority finances, and staff.

²⁶ According to a survey by SNA of more than 1,000 of its member districts, 98% reported that school nutrition staff salaries were included in the school nutrition budget and 93% reported that school nutrition staff benefits were included in the school nutrition budget. SNA, *2020 Compensation and Benefits Report*, March 11, 2020, p. 33.

²⁷ School meal regulations at 7 C.F.R. Part 210 require that all revenue from foodservice operations be retained in a *nonprofit school foodservice account*. The regulations also require, for example, that school meal programs be conducted on a "nonprofit" basis, meaning that such revenue is used "solely for the operation or improvement of such food services," and that net cash resources be limited to an amount that does not exceed three months' average expenditures. School food authorities must also comply with Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards established at 2 C.F.R. Part 200, which, among provisions, establish certain allowable and unallowable costs (labor is an allowable cost).

²⁸ Per federal regulations at 2 C.F.R. Part 200.426 and USDA guidance (USDA, FNS, "Unpaid Meal Charges: Clarification on Collection of Delinquent Meal Payments," SP 47-2016, July 8, 2016), federal funds cannot be used to cover "bad debt;" thus, school districts would have to cover the costs of unpaid meal charges with school district general funds or other nonfederal funds. There are no federal requirements that other foodservice losses must be paid by the general fund; however, school districts may have to use general funds to pay contractual costs (e.g., labor, vendors) when foodservice funds fall short. For example, Minnesota requires school districts to use general funds to eliminate foodservice deficits (Minnesota Department of Education, "Non-profit Food Service Account," <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/FNS/SNP/mgmt/nonpr/048951>).

²⁹ USDA, FNS, Office of Policy Support, *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, Final Report Volume 3: School Meal Costs and Revenues*, April 2019, p. 43, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition-and-meal-cost-study>.

Figure 1. School Food Authority (SFA) Revenue by Source, School Year 2014-2015

Source: CRS based on USDA, FNS, Office of Policy Support, *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, Final Report Volume 3: School Meal Costs and Revenues*, April 2019, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition-and-meal-cost-study>.

Notes: Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

Salaries and benefits comprise a sizeable portion of school foodservice spending. A survey by the SNA of more than 1,000 of its member districts in fall 2019 found that, on average, half of districts' school nutrition budgets were spent on salaries and benefits.³⁰ Similarly, in a nationally representative survey of SFAs in school year 2014-2015, USDA found that labor costs represented 45% of the average foodservice account spending (tied with food costs as the category with the highest expenditures).³¹ About 80% of these labor costs were spent on the labor involved in meal production and service, and 20% of the costs were for "administration of school meal programs and other non-production activities to support school meals, such as cleaning and maintenance of kitchens, warehousing, and transportation costs."³² Like other school district employees, foodservice personnel salaries may be subject to district-wide pay scales or caps.³³

SFA Finances and Staffing During the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the pandemic, the number of students purchasing and receiving school meals declined as schools closed or operated on hybrid schedules. Likewise, federal funding for school meals—which is linked to participation—initially declined. Supplemental funding provided by COVID-19 pandemic response acts and USDA for school meals programs has since restored funding levels.³⁴ This included funding for policies that enabled free meal service to all students (without eligibility determinations) in school years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022.³⁵

According to a survey by SNA of roughly 1,300 of its school district members at the end of school year 2020-2021, nearly half (48%) reported a net loss for the school nutrition account (a subsequent USDA survey found that 33% of SFAs reported operating at a deficit at the end of the school year).³⁶ In addition, nearly half of the

³⁰ Ibid, p. 36.

³¹ USDA, FNS, Office of Policy Support, *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, Final Report Volume 3: School Meal Costs and Revenues*, April 2019, p. 23, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNMCS-Volume3.pdf>.

³² Ibid, p. 26.

³³ For example, see Fairfax County Public Schools, "FY 2022 Unified Scale - Schedule H: Food Services Pay Plan," <https://www.fcps.edu/sites/default/files/media/pdf/FY22-unified-H.pdf>.

³⁴ USDA, FNS, "2023 USDA Explanatory Notes – Food and Nutrition Service," March 28, 2022, <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/35-2023-FNS.pdf>.

³⁵ For more information, see CRS Report R46681, *USDA Nutrition Assistance Programs: Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

³⁶ SNA, *Back to School 2021 Report: A Summary of Survey Results*, p. 30, https://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/News_and_Publications/Press_Releases/Press_Releases/Back-to-School-Report-2021.pdf; USDA, FNS, *Results of the*

surveyed districts reported that they had reduced staffing (defined as a reduction in hours, layoffs, or deferred hiring) since the start of the pandemic.³⁷

In school year 2021-2022, some labor issues persisted. According to a national USDA survey, 73% of SFAs reported increased staff stress and workloads as of October 2021, and 53% reported reduced staff morale.³⁸ More than half of SFAs reported shortages of cooks and food preparation staff, drivers, and maintenance staff, and nearly half reported shortages of cashiers and cafeteria monitors.³⁹ (Labor shortages have affected a variety of industries in recent years.⁴⁰) Not all SFAs may be in a financial position to attract such workers. While the survey found that school foodservice finances improved compared to the prior school year, 26% of SFAs reported operating at a deficit as of October 2021.⁴¹

Applicable Federal Laws and Policies

Federal Workplace Protections

In addition to labor protections and standards that may be provided under state and local labor laws, many school foodservice workers are protected by federal laws and programs that govern employment relationships.⁴² These include the following:

- The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which entitles most covered workers to a federal minimum hourly wage (currently \$7.25 per hour) or an applicable state or local minimum wage if that wage is higher than the federal minimum wage. More than half of the states currently have minimum wage rates for FLSA-covered workers that are above the federal rate.⁴³ The FLSA also requires additional payment for hours worked in excess of 40 per workweek for some workers covered by the act. Such workers must be compensated at one-and-a-half times their regular rate of pay for each hour worked over 40 in a workweek.⁴⁴

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service-Administered School Food Authority Survey on Supply Chain Disruptions, March 2022, p. 8, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/results-fns-administered-school-food-authority-survey-supply-chain-disruption>.

³⁷ SNA, *Back to School 2021 Report: A Summary of Survey Results*, p. 33, https://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/News_and_Publications/Press_Releases/Press_Releases/Back-to-School-Report-2021.pdf.

³⁸ USDA, FNS, Results of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service-Administered School Food Authority Survey on Supply Chain Disruptions, March 2022, p. 7, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/results-fns-administered-school-food-authority-survey-supply-chain-disruption>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ For further information, see CRS Insight IN11770, *Labor Market Tightness and the Economic Recovery, Part 1*; CRS Report R47047, *Job Openings and Labor Turnover Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic*; and Laura Reiley, “The cold truth about hot lunch: School meal programs are running out of food and workers,” *Washington Post*, September 21, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/09/29/schools-supply-chain-crisis>.

⁴¹ USDA, FNS, Results of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service-Administered School Food Authority Survey on Supply Chain Disruptions, March 2022, p. 8, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/results-fns-administered-school-food-authority-survey-supply-chain-disruption>.

⁴² Many of the typical labor protections provided by federal legislation, such as those in the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), center on the concepts of employee and employer. CRS could not locate sources that describe the number of school foodservice workers who are in traditional employment relationships and the number who are independent contractors. Workers who are independent contractors would not be covered under some federal labor laws.

⁴³ See CRS Report R43792, *State Minimum Wages: An Overview*. The FLSA allows the payment of subminimum wages in some cases, such as for individuals with disabilities and youth workers. See CRS Report R43089, *The Federal Minimum Wage: In Brief* for details.

⁴⁴ As with the minimum wage, there are limited exemptions to the requirement for overtime compensation; see CRS

- The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which entitles eligible employees to unpaid, job-protected leave for qualifying family and medical reasons. Eligibility for FMLA benefits is tied to an individual's work history with a covered employer.⁴⁵ Private sector employers are covered by FMLA requirements if they have at least 50 employees and certain conditions are met. All public agencies (i.e., federal, state, and local governments) covered by the act are covered employers regardless of employment levels.
- The federal-state Unemployment Compensation (UC) program, which is the cornerstone of the income support for unemployed workers and is generally financed by employer taxes.⁴⁶ Whereas the specifics of UC benefits are determined by each state, generally eligibility is based on attaining qualifying wages and employment in covered work. Federal UC law allows states to deny workers unemployment benefits between school terms.⁴⁷

Whereas the above-noted federal laws can apply to foodservice workers employed by public or private schools (or by a foodservice management company), some federal labor laws explicitly exclude public sector employees from coverage. For example, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which guarantees employees the right to organize and bargain collectively over conditions of employment and protects them against unfair employer and union activities, does not cover public-sector employees (i.e., employees of state, federal, and local governments and their subdivisions, including local educational agencies), among other groups. The Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSH Act), which provides health and safety standards for workplaces, excludes state and local government entities (generally including local educational agencies) from the set of employers subject to federal regulations, inspections, or enforcement authorized by the act.⁴⁸ Private schools are considered employers under the OSH Act and are subject to federal jurisdiction, as are some charter schools, depending on their administrative structure and governance.

Report R44138, *Overtime Provisions in the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA): Frequently Asked Questions* for more details.

⁴⁵ For details on the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), see CRS Report R44274, *The Family and Medical Leave Act: An Overview of Title I*.

⁴⁶ The underlying framework of the UC system is contained in the Social Security Act. Title III of the act authorizes state grants for administering state UC laws; Title IX authorizes the various components of the federal Unemployment Trust Fund (UTF); and Title XII authorizes advances or loans to insolvent state programs. UC is financed by federal taxes under the Federal Unemployment Tax Act (FUTA) and by state payroll taxes under the State Unemployment Tax Acts (SUTA). For more information on the UC program, see CRS Report RL33362, *Unemployment Insurance: Programs and Benefits*.

⁴⁷ 26 U.S.C. §3304(a)(6)(A). See U.S. Department of Labor, *Unemployment Insurance Program Letter*, UIPL 5-17, December 22, 2016, https://wdr.doleta.gov/directives/corr_doc.cfm?DOCN=8999. The law permits a state, at its option, to deny benefits based on services in educational employment between successive academic years or terms to other employees of a school or of an educational service agency who perform services for or on behalf of an educational institution if the individual performed services (other than in an instructional, research, or administrative capacity) during the year or term and has a reasonable assurance or a contract to perform services in the second year or term. The option for denial of benefits also applies to vacation or holiday periods within school years or terms. However, the law requires states to pay benefits retroactively to school personnel performing these other services if they were given reasonable assurances of reemployment but were not rehired when the new school term or year began.

⁴⁸ Local educational agencies in some states are covered by state plans approved by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which administers the OSH Act. See CRS In Focus IF11619, *OSHA Jurisdiction Over Public Schools and Other State and Local Government Entities: COVID-19 Issues*.

Voluntary Employer-Provided Benefits

Beyond federally mandated workplace protections and standards, some employers voluntarily provide workplace benefits to their employees. **Table 3** presents Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data that describe workers’ access to a selection of employer-provided benefits. Rates for all workers (all occupations) and service occupation workers who are employed in private sector establishments or employed by state and local governments (including local educational agencies) are presented separately. (BLS does not publish rates for school foodservice workers specifically.) Notably, workers employed by state and local governments have higher rates of access than private sector employees to the employer-provided benefits included in the table. And, while workers in service jobs in both sectors have lower access to health benefits, retirement benefits, and paid sick leave than do workers overall, the differentials are markedly smaller for service workers employed by state and local governments (except in the case of child care benefits). To the extent that such trends hold for school foodservice workers, it may be the case that public school employment is associated with better benefits than employment in private schools or employment by a foodservice management company.⁴⁹

Table 3. Access to Selected Employer-Provided Benefits, 2021

Benefit Type	Private Sector		State and Local Governments	
	Workers in All Occupations	Service Occupations	Workers in All Occupations	Service Occupations
Health benefits	71%	44%	89%	82%
Retirement benefits	68%	40%	92%	85%
Child care benefits	10%	10%	15%	13%
Paid sick leave	77%	59%	92%	87%

Source: CRS analysis of BLS, *National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in the United States, March 2021*, September 2021, Tables 2, 10, 33, and 41, <https://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/benefits/2021/home.htm>.

Notes: In the National Compensation Survey (NCS), an employee is considered to have “access” to a benefit plan if it is available for their use, regardless of whether the employee chooses to participate in the given benefit plan. In the NCS, *health care benefits* is a collective term for medical, dental, vision, and outpatient prescription drug benefits. If a worker has access to at least one of these benefits, that individual is considered to have access to health care. *Retirement benefits* include defined benefit pension plans and defined contribution retirement plans. If a worker has access to at least one of these plan types, that individual is considered to have access to retirement benefits. *Child care benefits* refer to the provision of either full or partial reimbursement for the cost of child care in a nursery, in a daycare center, or by a babysitter. *Paid sick leave* is a paid absence from work if an employee is unable to work because of a non-work-related illness or injury. The employer usually provides all or part of an employee’s earnings. Employees commonly receive their regular pay for a specified number of days off per year. Sick leave is provided on a per-year basis, usually expressed in days, and is never insured.

School Meals Program Laws and Policies

There are minimal references to school foodservice employees in the school meals programs’ authorizing laws and regulations. As noted earlier, federal regulations and guidance allow SFAs to use federal meal reimbursements to cover school foodservice labor costs, including salaries and

⁴⁹ As discussed in the “Characteristics of Public School Foodservice Workers” section, the majority (72%) of public school foodservice workers employed between 2015 and 2019 had health insurance through an employer or union, compared to 66% of private-sector school foodservice workers and 50% of foodservice workers generally.

benefits.⁵⁰ Other policies in statute and regulations establish hiring standards and training requirements and provide funding for training for school foodservice staff (discussed below).

Hiring Standards and Training Requirements

Federal hiring standards and training requirements for school nutrition professionals were added to Section 7(g) of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA; P.L. 111-296).⁵¹ Specifically, the HHFKA required USDA to establish minimum educational and training/certification requirements for school nutrition *directors* and annual training/certification for all school nutrition personnel, including outsourced employees.

USDA published a final rule in March 2015 adopting different hiring standards for school nutrition directors in differently sized school districts, which became effective in school year 2015-2016.⁵² In response to hiring challenges voiced by smaller school districts, a subsequent rule by USDA loosened the requirements for small districts (effective April 30, 2019).⁵³ In general, the hiring requirements increase with district size. School nutrition director hires in small districts must have at least a high school diploma or the equivalent; in midsize districts, they must have an associate's or bachelor's degree; and in large school districts, they must have a bachelor's degree. A major in specific nutrition-related fields is typically required but may be substituted with relevant experience or certifications in some cases.⁵⁴

In terms of training and certification, the March 2015 final rule established 12 hours of required annual training for school nutrition directors and 10 hours of annual training for school nutrition program managers in specified topics starting in school year 2016-2017.⁵⁵ For other types of staff who work more than 20 hours per week, six hours of annual training are required; for staff who work less than 20 hours per week, four hours are required. Temporary staff, substitutes, and volunteers are also required to complete some training within 30 days of starting work. School nutrition staff may complete some or all of their required training through federally funded resources, such as the Institute of Child Nutrition (discussed in the next section) and virtual USDA-provided trainings (e.g., in food safety).⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Program regulations at 7 C.F.R. §210.14 allow federal funds to be used “for the operation or improvement of” the school food service, including for “facilities, equipment, and personnel.” They also require expenditures under the school food service account to comply with federal cost principles at 2 C.F.R. Part 200, which allows coverage of wages and benefits. Wages and salaries of staff working in the school food service are considered direct costs according to USDA FNS, “Indirect Costs: Guidance for State Agencies & School Food Authorities,” September 30, 2016, p. 2, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/indirect-cost-guidance>.

⁵¹ Section 306 of P.L. 111-296.

⁵² USDA, FNS, “Professional Standards for State and Local School Nutrition Programs Personnel as Required by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010,” 80 *Federal Register* 11077, March 2, 2015.

⁵³ USDA, FNS, “Hiring Flexibility Under Professional Standards,” 84 *Federal Register* 6953, March 1, 2019.

⁵⁴ For the full requirements, see 7 C.F.R. §210.30.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* For directors, training must include “administrative practices (including training in application, certification, verification, meal counting, and meal claiming procedures).” For managers and other staff, training must include administrative practices as well as “the identification of reimbursable meals at the point of service,” nutrition, and health and safety standards. FNS may also require training in other topics.

⁵⁶ USDA, FNS, “Guide to Professional Standards for School Nutrition Programs,” FNS-303, December 2020, p. 5, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/guide-professional-standards-school-nutrition-programs>.

Each year, SFAs must document and certify that all staff have completed the annual training requirements.⁵⁷ State agencies oversee compliance with the hiring and training requirements as part of their cyclical reviews of SFAs.⁵⁸

The HHFKA provided mandatory funding of \$5 million in FY2011 and \$1 million annually thereafter to implement the hiring and training requirements. The March 2015 final rule also specified that SFAs may use federal meal reimbursements to cover training costs, but not the cost of obtaining college credits.

Federal Funding for Training

School meal reimbursements may be used for labor costs, including training costs. There are also two specific initiatives that support training for school foodservice professionals:

- **Institute of Child Nutrition:** Section 21 of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act authorizes and provides annual mandatory funding (\$5 million) for a foodservice management institute with the purpose of providing training and technical assistance to improve the skills of school foodservice personnel. Since the institute’s authorization in 1989, USDA has awarded funds to the University of Mississippi to operate it.⁵⁹ The institute provides online training for free and in-person training “at little or no cost” to SFAs.⁶⁰
- **Team Nutrition:** Section 19 of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 authorizes funding for USDA and states to carry out activities and training related to nutrition promotion.⁶¹ With discretionary annual appropriations (\$18 million in FY2022), USDA has provided grants to states in certain years to carry out nutrition initiatives.⁶² Some of these initiatives have included training for school foodservice staff. For example, USDA awarded grants to 11 states in FY2017 for programs aimed at supporting the implementation of updated nutrition standards for meals and snacks, including training for school food professionals such as culinary training and training on compliance with nutrition standards.⁶³

Existing Research on the School Foodservice Workforce

To date, little research has examined school nutrition workers: who they are, their education and skills, and their economic standing. Available studies use older data or focus on specific segments

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ A foodservice management institute was authorized in the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 1989 (Section 109 of P.L. 101-147). In 1992, language was added by P.L. 102-337 to specify that funds would go to the University of Mississippi; see Section 21(a)(2) and (e)(1)(B) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act.

⁶⁰ USDA FNS, “2022 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service,” <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/34FNS2022Notes.pdf>; and Institute of Child Nutrition, “About the Institute of Child Nutrition,” <https://theicn.org/about-us>.

⁶¹ Section 19 was added to the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 by P.L. 95-166 in 1977.

⁶² Explanatory statement accompanying Division A of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022 (P.L. 117-103) (*Congressional Record*, Vol. 168, No. 42-Book III, March 9, 2022), <https://www.congress.gov/117/crec/2022/03/09/168/42/CREC-2022-03-09-bk3.pdf>.

⁶³ USDA, FNS, “FY 2017 Team Nutrition Training Grants,” <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/2017-training-grants>.

of the workforce (e.g., cafeteria workers). This past research indicates that frontline cafeteria workers are predominantly female and have lower compensation and educational attainment than the workforce as a whole. In contrast, school nutrition directors and administrators tend to have higher educational levels and salaries. Topics that have received less attention in the school foodservice workforce research literature include seasonal changes in employment, whether such workers are paid for required training, and professional development/upward mobility opportunities.

This section recaps the existing research on school foodservice employees' characteristics and labor market outcomes. The next section ("Describing the School Foodservice Workforce Using National Survey Data") presents ACS data from 2015 to 2019 on the labor force.

Demographics

Prior research on the demographics of the school foodservice workforce is limited. However, there are some historical data. For example, a 2010 study examined the workforce characteristics of school cafeteria workers (specific occupations were not defined in the study) using national ACS data from 2008.⁶⁴ The study found that school cafeteria workers were relatively older, with a median age of 47 compared to the median age of 40 for the American labor force as a whole. Ninety-three percent of cafeteria workers were female, which was nearly double the rate of female workers nationally (47%) the same year. Cafeteria employees were also more likely to be married and have dependent children living at home.⁶⁵ Racial demographics of cafeteria employees generally mirrored that of the workforce as a whole.⁶⁶

Education and Credentials

Prior studies have also shed light on educational attainment among particular segments of the school food workforce. The aforementioned 2010 study found that the most common level of education for school cafeteria workers was completion of a high school diploma (54%). Such workers were less likely than the general workforce to have completed some college (21% vs. 31%) or a bachelor's degree (3% vs. 30%).⁶⁷

A few studies have examined educational attainment among school nutrition directors specifically. One USDA study surveyed educational attainment among SFA directors prior to the implementation of the HHFKA hiring standards (discussed previously in the "Hiring Standards and Training Requirements" section). It found that 12% of SFA directors had advanced degrees, 29% had bachelor's degrees, 13% had associate's degrees, 20% had some college but no degree, and 26% had high school diplomas. Directors at larger SFAs had higher levels of educational attainment.⁶⁸ Another survey by SNA collected information on educational attainment for several

⁶⁴ Ken Jacobs and Dave Graham-Squire, *Labor Standard for School Cafeteria Workers, Turnover, and Public Program Utilization*, Berkeley Journal of Employment and Labor Law 31, no. 2, 2010, pp. 447-458, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43551793?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents. For more information about the ACS, see the "Data and Approach" section of this CRS report.

⁶⁵ Seventy-one percent of school cafeteria workers were married compared with 55% of all workers, and 63% had children under 18 years of age at home versus 44% of all workers. *Ibid.*, p. 450.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Urban location and low poverty level of the SFA were also correlated with higher educational attainment among SFA directors. USDA, FNS, Office of Policy Support, *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, Final Report Volume 1: School Meal Program Operations and School Nutrition Environments*, prepared by Mathematica Policy Research and

districtwide positions in fall 2019. The survey found that, of 978 responding school nutrition directors, 23% had master’s degrees, 45% had bachelor’s degrees, 14% had vocational or technical degrees, 12% had some college but no degree, and 7% had a high school diploma.⁶⁹

USDA’s study of school meal programs in school year 2014-2015 also measured certifications among school nutrition directors. The study found that 58% of SFA directors had food safety certifications. Other credentials included state foodservice or health department certifications, various SNA certifications, and dietician or nutritionist licenses. However, none of these credentials were held by more than 20% of SFA directors. Twenty-three percent of directors had no certifications.⁷⁰

Some qualitative research has suggested that disparities in educational attainment between frontline workers and managers could present difficulties for the former in progressing through the career ladder to management.⁷¹

Labor Market Outcomes

Wages and Salaries

The SNA survey in fall 2019 reported median salaries or hourly wages for various school and district positions, ranging from dishwashers to school nutrition directors.⁷² Median salaries or hourly wages for selected positions are shown in the table below.

Table 4. Median Compensation for Selected School Foodservice Positions, Fall 2019
As Reported by the School Nutrition Association

Job Title	Median Salary or Wage
School Nutrition Director (School Foodservice Director, Child Nutrition Director)	\$71,000 per year
Assistant Director (School Nutrition Supervisor, Area Supervisor)	\$56,000 per year
Administrative Assistant (Secretary)	\$35,000 per year
Manager (Cafeteria Manager, Foodservice Manager)	\$17.50 per hour
Head Cook (Cook)	\$15.00 per hour
Foodservice Assistant (School Nutrition Assistant, Server), Full-Time	\$13.71 per hour
Foodservice Assistant (School Nutrition Assistant, Server), Part-Time	\$13.17 per hour

Source: Adapted from SNA, *2020 Compensation and Benefits Report*, March 11, 2020.

Abt Associates, April 2019, pp. 34-35, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNMCS-Volume1.pdf>.

⁶⁹ SNA, *2020 Compensation and Benefits Report*, March 11, 2020, p. vii.

⁷⁰ USDA, FNS, Office of Policy Support, *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, Final Report Volume 1: School Meal Program Operations and School Nutrition Environments*, prepared by Mathematica Policy Research and Abt Associates, April 2019, pp. A55-A58.

⁷¹ Jennifer E. Gaddis, *The Labor of Lunch* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019), p. 7.

⁷² Although these wages were captured a decade later than the 2010 study, it is possible that frontline workers such as school nutrition assistants experienced real wage growth in the intervening decade. With a cumulative rate of inflation of 17.2% from 2010 to 2019, \$10.45 would be equivalent to \$12.25 in 2019. For comparison, SNA reported median hourly rates of \$13.17 and \$13.71 for foodservice assistants. See BLS, Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

Notes: Includes positions with more than 300 respondents. All positions are full time unless otherwise specified. Hourly wages in this table are the median typical wage rather than median starting wage, which was also collected in the survey.

The aforementioned 2010 study found a median hourly wage of \$10.45 in 2008 for frontline cafeteria workers.⁷³ This was about 59% of the 2008 median hourly wage for all American workers (\$17.58). The study estimated that the median cafeteria worker—who worked 25 hours per week and 40 weeks per year—earned \$9,300 annually in 2008. The study also found that cafeteria workers were more likely than workers as a whole to live in poverty and to participate in public programs such as Medicaid.⁷⁴

Full- and Part-Time Status and Benefits

Part-time work is common among school foodservice workers. The SNA survey found that part-time workers comprised roughly 40% of the school nutrition workforce in responding school districts as of school year 2019-2020. It also found that the definitions of *full-time* and *part-time* were not consistent across school districts. On average, districts required 30 hours of work per week to qualify an employee for full-time status; however, the requirement was as low as 10 hours in some districts and as high as 40 hours in other districts.⁷⁵

Part-time school nutrition staff were much less likely to be eligible for benefits such as health insurance and retirement/pension plans compared to full-time workers. Nearly all responding districts offered health insurance to full-time staff; 28% offered it to part-time staff. The majority of districts also reported offering dental insurance, life insurance, and long-term disability insurance to full-time staff, while less than a quarter offered these benefits to part-time staff.⁷⁶ In terms of benefit cost to workers, there is some evidence that benefits constitute a higher proportion of compensation for “blue collar” school employees, including foodservice workers, than for “white collar” employees, such as teachers.⁷⁷

Other Labor Dynamics and Issues

Seasonal changes in employment are a common dynamic in the school foodservice industry.⁷⁸ The volume of school meals provided in the summer is much lower than during the school year,

⁷³ Ken Jacobs and Dave Graham-Squire, *Labor Standard for School Cafeteria Workers, Turnover, and Public Program Utilization*, *Berkeley Journal of Employment and Labor Law* 31, no. 2, 2010, pp. 447-458, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43551793?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 455. Fourteen percent of cafeteria workers participated in Medicaid in 2010, compared to 7% of all workers.

⁷⁵ SNA, *2020 Compensation and Benefits Report*, March 11, 2020, pp. 8-10.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-75.

⁷⁷ Jeffrey Clemens and David M. Cutler, “Who Pays for Public Employee Health Costs?” *Journal of Health Economics* 38, p. 70, 2014. The “blue collar” characterization also included janitorial staff and bus drivers. The “white collar” label applied to teachers, pupil support staff, and school administrators.

⁷⁸ This is evident in job postings and employee handbooks. For example, a job posting for Fulton County Schools in Georgia lists 181 workdays for the position of Food Service Worker. See Fulton County Schools, Food Service Worker Job Description, <https://nutrition.fultonschools.org/PDF/Food%20Service%20Worker%20Job%20Description.pdf>.

causing a lower demand for labor.⁷⁹ However, some school foodservice employees transition to working for federally-supported summer meals programs during the summer months.⁸⁰

Unionization is a less common dynamic in the school foodservice workforce. In its fall 2019 survey, SNA reported 13.1% union membership among school nutrition management; 29.4% among full-time, non-management workers; and 27.9% among part-time, non-management workers.⁸¹ More generally, union membership for employees working in foodservice and preparation (not specific to schools) was 3.5% in 2021.⁸² There is not a dedicated union for school foodservice workers.⁸³ However, cafeteria workers in some districts are represented by unions oriented towards service workers such as UNITE HERE or the Service Employees International Union.

As discussed in this report (see the “Outsourcing” section), an increasing proportion of school districts have outsourced their foodservice operations. There is limited research on the effects of outsourcing on school nutrition employees. In the public sector broadly, studies have shown that outsourcing can lead to the conversion of positions from full-time to part-time, which sometimes leads to a reduction in benefits.⁸⁴

Another unique aspect of the frontline cafeteria workforce in particular is the caretaking aspect of the profession. Qualitative research has found that for some workers, the emotional investment in the children they serve can be a source of both exhaustion and fulfillment.⁸⁵

Describing the School Foodservice Workforce Using National Survey Data

This section uses data from the American Community Survey, a large-scale nationally representative household survey, to describe the personal, family, and work characteristics of selected food preparation, serving, and supervisory workers employed in public elementary and

⁷⁹ For example, in summer 2019 there were roughly 3.7 million children served through summer feeding programs (July participation in the Summer Food Service Program and NSLP/Seamless Summer Option), compared with nearly 30 million children served through NSLP in fall 2019; USDA, FNS, “September 2020 Keydata Report,” January 27, 2021, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/data/september-2020-keydata-report>.

⁸⁰ CRS communication with SNA in April 2022.

⁸¹ SNA, *2020 Compensation and Benefits Report*, March 11, 2020, p. ii.

⁸² BLS, 2021 Union Membership News Release, Table 3. Union membership of employed wage and salary workers by occupation and industry. January 20, 2022. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t03.htm>.

⁸³ Jennifer E. Gaddis, *The Labor of Lunch* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019), p. 152.

⁸⁴ Although it was not specific to school foodservice workers, there is some evidence of public sector outsourcing negatively impacting employment. Using data from a nationally representative panel of local governments, Fernandez, Smith, and Wagner found that outsourcing to for-profit vendors was related to a decrease in full-time employment and increase in part-time employment; see Sergio Fernandez, Craig R. Smith, and Jeffrey B. Wagner, *Employment, Privatization, and Managerial Choice: Does Contracting Out Reduce Public Sector Employment?*, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 26, 2006, p. 57. For further reading on domestic outsourcing, see David Dorn, Johannes F. Schmieder, and James R. Spletzer, *Domestic Outsourcing in the United States*, U.S. Department of Labor, January 2018; Annette Bernhardt, Rosemary L. Batt, Susan N. Houseman, and Eileen Appelbaum, *Domestic Outsourcing in the United States: A Research Agenda to Assess Trends and Effects on Job Quality*, Upjohn Institute Working Paper 253, 2016; and Marcus O. Dillender, Carolyn J. Heinrich, and Susan N. Houseman, *Health insurance reform and part-time work: Evidence from Massachusetts*, *Labour Economics* 43, December 2016, pp. 151-158.

⁸⁵ This is discussed in “Chapter 4, Cafeteria Workers in the Prison of Love,” of Jennifer E. Gaddis, *The Labor of Lunch* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019).

secondary schools.⁸⁶ Due to limitations of the ACS data, some school foodservice workers, such as administrative staff and certain leadership positions, are excluded from analysis. Worker characteristics are also compared to those in other foodservice and related worker groups.

The analysis in this section is similar to that included in the 2010 study described in the previous section.⁸⁷ However, in addition to using more-current data, this section presents the groups (occupations) of school foodservice workers studied. As a result, some findings between the 2010 analysis and current analysis may differ.

Data and Approach

Analysis in this section is based on pooled ACS data collected over the 2015-2019 period (five years of data).⁸⁸ In addition to demographic data (e.g., age, sex, race, educational attainment), ACS data contain information on employment (e.g., employment status, occupation, industry, usual weekly hours and annual weeks of work, annual earnings), and family characteristics (e.g., family income, poverty status, family size). ACS data are collected monthly and then combined to form annual data (i.e., each year of data contains information from 12 monthly independent samples).⁸⁹

The ACS collects detailed information from a relatively large sample; its public use files contain data from about 1% of the U.S. population in each survey year. This is an advantage when examining relatively small worker groups, such as public sector school foodservice workers, but ACS data are not without limitations. For example, information is collected among employed workers only about the job worked at the time of the interview. This means that some school foodservice workers who are interviewed during the summer (when school foodservice employment is low) will not be identified in the data as part of the school foodservice workforce.⁹⁰ More broadly, the ACS cannot be used to study school foodservice workers' movement between jobs over the course of the year (e.g., in the summer or other times when school food services are scaled down). ACS information on wage and salary earnings and annual weeks of employment describe earnings and employment for *all jobs* held in the 12 months that

⁸⁶ Census Bureau information about the ACS is at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/about.html>. CRS used the public use microdata sample (PUMS) data, which includes a subsample (approximately two-thirds of responses collected in a given calendar year) of the full ACS microdata. CRS downloaded selected variables from the public use microdata sample from the IPUMS-USA database on February 23, 2022. Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler and Matthew Sobek, IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset], Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V11.0>.

⁸⁷ Ken Jacobs and Dave Graham-Squire, *Labor Standard for School Cafeteria Workers, Turnover, and Public Program Utilization*, Berkeley Journal of Employment and Labor Law 31, no. 2, 2010, pp. 447-458, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43551793?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

⁸⁸ The 2020 ACS public use microdata sample was released on November 30, 2021, with experimental weights, in an attempt to address data-collection challenges in 2020 presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Census Bureau is not releasing its standard ACS 1-year data products for 2020 data due to the impact from the pandemic on data collection and data quality. Survey nonresponse was a particular challenge in 2020, and according to the Census Bureau, those who did respond to the survey differed from those who did not respond in their social, economic, and housing characteristics, resulting in nonresponse bias. In addition, the Census Bureau advised that the 2020 ACS 1-year public use files using experimental weights should not be compared with other ACS public use data. For this reason, CRS did not extend the period of analysis in this section to 2020. Additional information is at <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-kits/2021/impact-pandemic-2020-acs-1-year.html> and <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data/experimental-data/2020-1-year-pums.html>.

⁸⁹ Additional information on ACS methodology is at https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/design_and_methodology/acs_design_methodology_report_2014.pdf.

⁹⁰ If employed at the time of the interview, the worker's current occupation will be recorded in the survey data.

precede the survey interview. For this reason, ACS data cannot be used to characterize earnings from school foodservice jobs alone; the data instead describe annual earnings of foodservice workers across all jobs worked in the previous 12 months.⁹¹ Similarly, ACS data do not describe the time period of employment as a school foodservice worker; instead, the data describe the number of weeks a school foodservice worker was employed, summed across all jobs held in the last 12 months.

Sample

CRS used industry and occupation of work to identify workers employed in school foodservice jobs. Specifically, observations were restricted to workers employed in public sector elementary and secondary schools (industry) at the time of the survey in selected food preparation and service occupations.⁹² Within this group, the sample was limited to persons who were employed at the time of the survey, worked at least 27 weeks in the 12 months preceding the interview, usually worked at least five hours per week (in their current job), and reported earnings of at least \$978.75 in the last 12 months.⁹³ This sample criteria was used to exclude workers with potentially weak labor force attachment (i.e., those employed less than half of the last year); applying these criteria reduces the unweighted sample by 8.7% (1,532 of 17,601 observations are excluded).

CRS observed that the characteristics of school foodservice workers tend to vary by specific occupation, and for this reason, this section also presents analysis that is disaggregated by selected occupations with at least 300 observations (over the pooled period).⁹⁴

Characteristics of Public School Foodservice Workers

Table 5 presents selected personal and employment characteristics of public school foodservice workers (column 2) and those of all workers (column 1; i.e., employed in any occupation or industry) interviewed between 2015 and 2019. (Additional comparisons of public sector foodservice workers to selected workers groups, including private-sector school foodservice employees, are in **Table 8**.)

School foodservice workers are overwhelmingly female (94%). Additionally, while the majority of these workers are White, they are disproportionately Black and Hispanic (when compared to

⁹¹ Earnings (referred to as wage or salary income in ACS documentation) include wages, salary, Armed Forces pay, commissions, tips, piece-rate payments, and cash bonuses earned before deductions (e.g., for taxes, pensions, union dues). Census Bureau, *ACS 2019 Subject Definitions*, https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/tech_docs/subject_definitions/2019_ACSSubjectDefinitions.pdf.

⁹² The “elementary and secondary schools” sector is identified by code 7860 in the 2012 Census Industrial Classification System. The following occupation categories are included in aggregate analysis (but some are excluded when analysis is disaggregated into individual occupational groups): foodservice and lodging managers; agricultural and food science technicians; dietitians and nutritionists; chefs and head cooks; first-line supervisors of food preparation and serving workers; cooks; food preparation workers; fast food and counter workers; waiters and waitresses; food servers, nonrestaurant; dining room and cafeteria attendants, helpers; dishwashers; host and hostesses, restaurant, lounge, and coffee shop; and food prep and serving related, all other.

⁹³ \$978.75 is 135 (5 x 27) hours compensated at the federal minimum wage of \$7.25.

⁹⁴ CRS explored an option to combine similar occupational categories with fewer than 300 observations, but opted to combine workers across occupations in one instance (“waiter and waitresses” and “food servers, nonrestaurant” were combined to form “food servers”). The characteristics of workers in other groups—even in groups with similar sounding titles—were too different to group with confidence. Worker groups omitted from the subgroup analysis were in the following occupations: fast food and counter workers (n=208); dishwashers (n=123); hosts and hostesses, restaurant, lounge, and coffee shop (n=5); food prep and serving related, all other (n=43); agricultural and food science technicians (n=5); and chefs and head cooks (n=204).

the workers in all occupations and sectors [column 1]). On average, school foodservice workers are 50 years old (compared to an average age of 42 among workers overall) and have completed high school as their highest level of educational attainment (51%, compared to 24% among workers overall).

School foodservice workers worked, on average, about 32 hours per week, and most worked between 48 and 52 weeks in the 12 months preceding their survey interview. Annual earnings were relatively low (median earnings were \$15,272 in the 12 months before the interview),⁹⁵ and about 16% reported receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. School foodservice workers had relatively high rates of health insurance coverage, but a higher share received coverage through public health insurance plans compared to workers in general.

Table 5. Selected Characteristics of Workers in All Occupations and Sectors and School Foodservice Workers (SFSW)

Worker Characteristics	Workers in All Occupations and Sectors (1)	SFSW in Elementary and Secondary Public Schools (2)
Mean age	42	50
Share of workers who are:		
Female	47%	94%
White	74%	70%
Black	12%	18%
Hispanic (can be of any race)	17%	21%
Share of workers with children at home:		
Under age 5	12%	5%
Ages 5 to 12	8%	7%
Ages 13 to 17	5%	8%
Educational attainment (share of workers)		
Did not complete high school	8%	13%
High school diploma or GED	24%	51%
Some college, no degree	22%	22%
Associate's degree	9%	7%
Bachelor's degree or higher	36%	6%
Mean hours worked per week	40	32
Weeks worked in the last 12 months (share of workers who worked at least 27 weeks in the last 12 months)		
27-39 weeks	4%	16%
40-47 weeks	5%	19%

⁹⁵ Median annual earnings for full-time (40 hours or more per work) public school foodservice workers who worked 50 to 52 weeks in the last 12 months (i.e., full-time, full-year workers) were \$23,740. For comparison, a full-time, full-year schedule compensated at the federal minimum wage (\$7.25 per hour) would have annual earnings of \$15,080.

Worker Characteristics	Workers in All Occupations and Sectors (1)	SFSW in Elementary and Secondary Public Schools (2)
48-52 weeks	91%	65%
Wage and salary income (last 12 months)		
Mean	\$56,933	\$19,880
Median	\$40,725	\$15,272
Share of workers with family income within 200% of their respective poverty thresholds	18%	34%
Share of workers with family income at or below 100% of their respective poverty thresholds	5%	11%
Share of workers who received SNAP benefits	8%	16%
Covered by health insurance	91%	93%
Public health insurance coverage	13%	22%
Health insurance through employer or union	73%	72%

Source: ACS data from 2015 through 2019, CRS calculations.

Notes: Sample for Column 2 comprises persons employed at the time of the survey in public sector elementary and secondary schools, who worked at least 27 weeks in the 12 months preceding the interview, usually worked at least five hours per week, and reported earnings of at least \$978.75 in the last 12 months (\$978.75 is 135 [27 x 5] hours compensated at the federal minimum wage of \$7.25).

Selected Occupations

Table 6 presents characteristics of workers employed in selected public school foodservice occupations and illustrates some differences across workers within the sector. The table shows, for example, that school foodservice managers were more likely to be married, White, male, and hold a bachelor’s degree than workers in some other occupations. Dieticians and nutritionists were also more likely to have a bachelor’s degree than other types of workers.⁹⁶ Cafeteria attendants and servers were more likely than workers in other occupations to be Black, and attendants/servers and food preparation workers were more likely to be Hispanic. Usual weekly work hours were lower for those preparing and serving food in school cafeterias than those in managerial or supervisory roles. Annual earnings were also higher for supervisors and managers than other foodservice workers. Cooks and food preparation and service workers were more likely to have family incomes within 200% of federal poverty guidelines and to report receipt of SNAP benefits. And, while health insurance coverage was over 90% for all occupation groups, managers and supervisors were more likely to have insurance through their employer or union, while workers in other occupation groups have had higher rates of public insurance.

⁹⁶ This analysis found that dieticians and nutritionists in public elementary/secondary schools had substantially lower earnings and educational levels compared with dieticians and nutritionists nationally, as reported in the BLS Occupational Outlook (<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/dietitians-and-nutritionists.htm>). The reasons for these differences are unclear.

Table 6. Selected Characteristics of Public School Foodservice Workers, by Occupation

Worker Characteristics	Foodservice Managers	Dietitians and Nutritionists	First-Line Supervisors of Food Preparation and Serving Workers	Cooks	Food Preparation Workers	Cafeteria Attendants and Servers
Mean age	52	47	51	50	49	50
Share of workers who are:						
Female	89%	92%	94%	95%	93%	94%
White	79%	68%	78%	70%	70%	66%
Black	16%	19%	12%	19%	15%	21%
Hispanic (can be of any race)	10%	20%	19%	20%	27%	25%
Share of workers with children at home:						
Under age 5	3%	9%	3%	5%	7%	4%
Ages 5 to 12	5%	9%	4%	7%	8%	8%
Ages 13 to 17	6%	9%	9%	8%	6%	7%
Educational attainment (share of workers)						
Did not complete high school	5%	5%	6%	15%	16%	16%
High school diploma or GED	40%	37%	50%	53%	50%	51%
Some college, no degree	27%	21%	28%	22%	20%	21%
Associate's degree	10%	12%	10%	6%	8%	7%
Bachelor's degree or higher	17%	25%	7%	5%	5%	6%

Worker Characteristics	Foodservice Managers	Dieticians and Nutritionists	First-Line Supervisors of Food Preparation and Serving Workers	Cooks	Food Preparation Workers	Cafeteria Attendants and Servers
Mean hours worked per week	40	35	37	32	29	29
Weeks worked in the last 12 months (share of workers who worked at least 27 weeks in the last 12 months)						
27-39 weeks	8%	6%	12%	16%	20%	17%
40-47 weeks	15%	22%	17%	18%	20%	21%
48-52 weeks	78%	73%	71%	66%	60%	62%
Wage and salary income (last 12 months)						
Mean	\$39,491	\$30,746	\$26,579	\$18,286	\$16,587	\$16,270
Median	\$31,961	\$20,611	\$23,417	\$14,914	\$12,784	\$12,784
Share of workers with family income within 200% of their respective poverty thresholds	12%	29%	24%	37%	35%	38%
Share of workers with family income at or below their respective poverty thresholds	2%	11%	5%	12%	13%	14%
Share of workers who received SNAP benefits	8%	20%	10%	16%	17%	18%
Covered by health insurance	96%	96%	97%	93%	91%	92%
Public health insurance coverage	9%	17%	10%	22%	26%	27%
Health insurance through employer or union	87%	83%	87%	72%	65%	64%

Source: ACS data from 2015 through 2019, CRS calculations.

Notes: Sample comprises persons employed at the time of the survey in public sector, elementary and secondary schools, who worked at least 27 weeks in the 12 months preceding the interview, usually worked at least five hours per week, and reported earnings of at least \$978.75 in the last 12 months (\$978.75 is 135 [27 x 5] hours compensated at the federal minimum wage of \$7.25). Occupations included in this table have at least 300 observations that meet sample requirements over the 2015-2019 period. Workers may be covered by both public health insurance and private insurance offered through an employer or union.

Usual Work Schedules (Part-Time and Full-Time Workers)

Table 7 presents selected work and resource characteristics for public sector school foodservice workers, by part-time (defined as 5-29 hours per week) and full-time (defined as 30 hours or more per week) work schedules.⁹⁷ Overall, full-time workers were more likely to work full-year (48-52 weeks), have higher annual earnings, and have health insurance coverage through an employer or union.

Table 7. Selected Characteristics of Public School Foodservice Workers, by Usual Work Hours Groups

Worker Characteristics	Part-Time (5-29 hours per week)	Full-Time (30+ hours per week)	All Schedules (5+ hours per week)
Share of public school foodservice workers	30%	70%	100%
Mean age	50.3	49.9	50.0
Share of workers who are:			
Female	94%	94%	94%
White	73%	70%	70%
Black	13%	20%	18%
Hispanic (can be of any race)	21%	21%	21%
Share of workers with children at home:			
Under age 5	5%	5%	5%
Ages 5 to 12	9%	6%	7%
Ages 13 to 17	8%	8%	8%
Educational attainment (share of workers)			
Did not complete high school	12%	14%	13%
High school diploma or GED	50%	51%	51%
Some college, no degree	24%	22%	22%
Associate's degree	8%	7%	7%
Bachelor's degree or higher	7%	6%	6%
Mean hours worked per week	20.2	37.1	32.0
Weeks worked in the last 12 months (share of workers who worked at least 27 weeks in the last 12 months)			
27-39 weeks	26%	11%	16%
40-47 weeks	26%	17%	19%
48-52 weeks	49%	73%	65%

⁹⁷ CRS considered Affordable Care Act (ACA) definitions when choosing the hours threshold that separates part-time and full-time work in this analysis. Employers with at least 50 full-time employees are generally required under the ACA to offer adequate, affordable health insurance coverage to all of its full-time employees. Under the ACA, an employee is generally considered full-time for each month that the individual works an average of at least 30 hours per week or 130 total hours in that month. See CRS Report R45455, *The Affordable Care Act's (ACA's) Employer Shared Responsibility Provisions (ESRP)*.

Worker Characteristics	Part-Time (5-29 hours per week)	Full-Time (30+ hours per week)	All Schedules (5+ hours per week)
Wage and salary income (last 12 months)			
Mean	\$11,849	\$23,393	\$19,880
Median	\$10,000	\$18,773	\$15,272
Share of workers with family income within 200% of their respective poverty thresholds	38%	33%	34%
Share of workers with family income at or below their respective poverty thresholds	16%	10%	11%
Covered by health insurance	92%	94%	93%
Public health insurance coverage	35%	16%	22%
Health insurance through employer or union	56%	79%	72%

Source: ACS data from 2015 through 2019, CRS calculations.

Notes: Sample comprises persons employed at the time of the survey in public sector elementary and secondary schools, who worked at least 27 weeks in the 12 months preceding the interview, usually worked at least five hours per week, and reported earnings of at least \$978.75 in the last 12 months (\$978.75 is 135 hours [27 x 5] compensated at the federal minimum wage of \$7.25).

Comparison of Public and Private Sector Foodservice Worker Groups

Table 8 compares selected characteristics of public sector elementary and secondary school foodservice workers (column 6) to all public sector workers (column 1), all foodservice workers (column 2), foodservice workers employed in the private sector (column 3), private sector elementary and secondary school foodservice workers (column 4), and public sector foodservice workers across all public sector industries (column 5). Note that private-sector school foodservice employees may work in both private and public schools (e.g., for a foodservice management company).

These comparisons show the following:

- Relative to all foodservice workers (column 2), school foodservice workers were more likely to be older, female, and Black.
- Both public and private sector school foodservice workers had relatively low usual weekly hours and had the lowest share of workers employed full year.
- Private and public sector school foodservice workers worked approximately 32 hours per week, on average, whereas foodservice workers overall (column 2) worked 35 hours per week and all public sector workers (column 1) worked, on average, 41 hours per week.
- 65% and 67% of public sector school foodservice workers and private sector school foodservice workers, respectively, were employed between 48 and 52 weeks in the last 12 months; rates of full-year employment ranged from about 74% to nearly 89% in the other comparison groups.
- Foodservice jobs (columns 2-6) had substantially lower earnings than all public sector workers (column 1); school foodservice workers had the lowest annual earnings of all groups included in the table.

- Public sector workers (columns 1, 5, 6) had relatively high rates of health insurance coverage. However, school foodservice workers, including those employed in public sector jobs, had relatively high rates of public health insurance coverage.

Table 8. Comparison of Public and Private Sector Foodservice Worker Groups

Worker Characteristics	Foodservice Workers					
	All Public Sector Workers	All Sectors	Private Sector		Public Sector	
			All Industries	Elementary and Secondary Schools	All Industries	Elementary and Secondary Schools
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Mean age	44	35	34	49	46	50
Share of workers who are:						
Female	54%	54%	52%	90%	79%	94%
White	73%	68%	68%	71%	65%	70%
Black	15%	13%	12%	18%	21%	18%
Hispanic (can be of any race)	13%	25%	26%	22%	19%	21%
Share of workers with children at home:						
Under age 5	12%	10%	11%	5%	7%	5%
Ages 5 to 12	8%	6%	6%	7%	6%	7%
Ages 13 to 17	6%	3%	3%	8%	6%	8%
Educational attainment (share of workers)						
Did not complete high school	3%	18%	19%	15%	12%	13%
High school diploma or GED	16%	34%	34%	50%	44%	51%
Some college, no degree	20%	29%	29%	23%	25%	22%
Associate's degree	9%	8%	7%	8%	7%	7%
Bachelor's degree or higher	52%	12%	11%	5%	12%	6%
Mean hours worked per week	41	35	35	33	34	32

Worker Characteristics	Foodservice Workers					
	All Public Sector Workers	All Sectors	Private Sector		Public Sector	
			All Industries	Elementary and Secondary Schools	All Industries	Elementary and Secondary Schools
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
Weeks worked in the last 12 months (share of workers)						
27-39 weeks	4%	8%	8%	15%	12%	16%
40-47 weeks	7%	7%	7%	18%	14%	19%
48-52 weeks	89%	85%	85%	67%	74%	65%
Wage and salary income (last 12 months)						
Mean	\$57,005	\$24,692	\$23,735	\$19,314	\$24,326	\$19,880
Median	\$50,000	\$19,424	\$19,177	\$15,272	\$18,000	\$15,272
Share of workers with family income within 200% of their respective poverty thresholds	13%	40%	41%	34%	37%	34%
Share of workers with family income at or below their respective poverty thresholds	5%	14%	14%	11%	15%	11%
Share of workers who received SNAP benefits	5%	15%	16%	16%	15%	16%
Covered by health insurance	97%	78%	77%	90%	92%	93%
Public health insurance coverage	11%	20%	20%	22%	20%	22%
Health insurance through employer or union	84%	50%	49%	66%	69%	72%

Source: ACS data from 2015 through 2019, CRS calculations.

Notes: Sample comprises persons employed at the time of the survey in public sector, elementary and secondary schools, who worked at least 27 weeks in the 12 months preceding the interview, usually worked at least five hours per week, and reported earnings of at least \$978.75 in the last 12 months (\$978.75 is 135 [27 x 5] hours compensated at the federal minimum wage of \$7.25).

Appendix. Evolution of the School Foodservice Workforce

In some cities and localities across the United States, children were eating a school lunch as early as the late 1800s. These early school feeding initiatives were often started by women's associations, social welfare organizations, mothers, and teachers who were concerned about hunger and malnourishment and who fed children out of their homes or prepared meals offsite and brought them to schools.⁹⁸ They were run largely on a volunteer basis, sometimes collecting small fees from children.

By the 1920s and 1930s, these programs largely transitioned to being operated by schools and school districts.⁹⁹ Such programs were typically given a limited budget from the district and covered the remainder of their costs by charging children fees and/or soliciting private donations, and often secured approval to operate by promising to be self-sustaining enterprises.¹⁰⁰ Operation of the programs shifted to home economics graduates, who found school lunch service to be one of few fields receptive to women interested in the burgeoning field of nutrition science.¹⁰¹ These graduates were often White, middle-class women,¹⁰² some of whom promoted "scientific," standardized diets that ignored ethnic differences and preferences in food, and who pioneered the large-scale, low-cost production model that characterizes the school meal programs today.¹⁰³ Also involved were administrative staff, food preparation and serving staff, sometimes a professional dietician, and sometimes female students taking home economics classes.¹⁰⁴ Such staff included older women and women from varied racial and ethnic backgrounds, and some were volunteers.¹⁰⁵

The first federal funding for school lunches was provided specifically for labor costs during the Great Depression under New Deal agencies. In 1932 and 1933, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation granted loans to several towns in Missouri to cover school lunchroom labor costs.¹⁰⁶ Also in 1933, the Federal Emergency Relief Association provided funding to states for emergency relief, including to hire unemployed women in school lunchrooms, which resulted in the employment of an estimated 7,400 women.¹⁰⁷ In 1935, this support shifted to the Works Progress Administration, which eventually sponsored more than 64,000 school lunchroom jobs nationwide

⁹⁸ Susan Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America's Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008) (hereinafter, "Levine 2008"), pp. 10-38; G.W. Gunderson, *The National School Lunch Program: Background and Development*, USDA FNS, 1971, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp/history> (hereinafter, "Gunderson 1971"); and Jennifer E. Gaddis, *The Labor of Lunch* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019) (hereinafter, "Gaddis 2019"), pp. 16-51.

⁹⁹ Gunderson 1971; Levine 2008, pp. 34-37.

¹⁰⁰ Gaddis 2019, p. 27.

¹⁰¹ Levine 2008, pp. 10-38.

¹⁰² Women of other races were more likely to need to work for a living and less able to volunteer. These early programs were also more likely to be located in wealthier, predominantly White communities because they required volunteer labor and local funding.

¹⁰³ Levine 2008, pp. 21-28; Gaddis 2019, pp. 16-51.

¹⁰⁴ Gaddis 2019, pp. 16-51; Levine 2008, p. 37.

¹⁰⁵ Levine 2008, p. 42.

¹⁰⁶ Gunderson 1971.

¹⁰⁷ A.R. Ruis, *Eating to Learn, Learning to Eat: The Origins of School Lunch in the United States* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017) (hereinafter, "Ruis 2017"), p. 122.

as of 1941. There were also 16,000 youths providing part-time help to school lunchrooms under the National Youth Administration that year.¹⁰⁸

The Works Progress Administration was disbanded in 1943, and federal support for school lunches shifted to annual appropriations that provided reimbursement for meals, which initially “could be used only to purchase food and to pay for professional nutritionists,” not to “pay salaries for lunchroom labor.”¹⁰⁹ Some states stretched their dollars by hiring one nutritionist to cover the whole state.¹¹⁰ Federal funding was made permanent in the National School Lunch Act in 1946, which did not include restrictions on the types of labor costs that could be covered. However, there were no specific funds provided for labor or training costs, and as is the case today, labor costs were one of many competing uses of meal reimbursement funding.

Under the new law, school nutrition professionals also had a growing list of responsibilities, including compliance with federal regulations and developing processes through which children qualified for free lunches.¹¹¹ Men graduating from business and management programs increasingly displaced female home economists in school foodservice director roles (a gender shift similar to other occupations in the post-World War II era), which would become a long-term trend.¹¹² School cooks and frontline foodservice staff were often mothers who worked part-time jobs, and data showed they were paid lower wages compared to other foodservice industry workers.¹¹³ In the 1940s through the 1960s, school lunch programs were most likely to operate in suburban, rural, and predominantly White school districts, in part because the National School Lunch Act required local financial capacity to cover matching funds, upfront costs prior to receiving federal reimbursement, and cafeteria equipment not covered by federal funding.¹¹⁴

Reforms in the 1960s and 1970s led to broader participation in the National School Lunch Program and the new School Breakfast Program. However, additional federal funds provided on the basis of need could not be used for labor costs, reinforcing disparities between poorer and wealthier school districts.¹¹⁵ An increase to the federal minimum wage led to higher wages for frontline staff, but a shift to reheating and serving pre-processed meals concurrently enabled districts to cut labor costs, particularly school cook positions. The 1970s saw the legalization of outsourcing in the programs as well as debates over unionizing school foodservice workers, which occurred at a slower pace compared to other industries.¹¹⁶ Data showed that school foodservice staff were paid less than teachers, bus drivers, and custodians, and were less likely to have full-time positions.¹¹⁷

As the federal government started enforcing a requirement that free meals be served to eligible children, districts raised meal fees for other children. This led to a decline in paid meal participation and student payments for meals. In addition, in 1981 the federal government cut \$1.4 billion (roughly one-quarter) of the school meal program budget. In a tight financial

¹⁰⁸ Gunderson 1971.

¹⁰⁹ Levine 2008, pp. 51, 58-59; Gunderson 1971; Ruis 2017, p. 136.

¹¹⁰ Gaddis 2019, p. 47.

¹¹¹ Levine 2008, p. 90

¹¹² Levine 2008, pp. 95-96; Gaddis 2019, pp. 81-82.

¹¹³ Levine 2008, pp. 97-98.

¹¹⁴ Levine 2008, pp. 99-103; Gaddis 2019, pp. 53-57.

¹¹⁵ Gaddis 2019, p. 77.

¹¹⁶ Gaddis 2019, pp. 69, 88-90; Levine pp. 156-163.

¹¹⁷ Gaddis 2019, p. 87.

situation, many districts cut costs by spending less on meal quality and by contracting with foodservice management companies and fast food restaurants, which displaced some school foodservice workers.¹¹⁸ Schools and districts that retained control over their foodservice operations increasingly relied on pre-processed foods, which meant that school kitchens did not need to work with raw ingredients as often as they used to, and some jobs shifted to private food processors.¹¹⁹

The trend toward outsourcing school foodservice operations continued from the late 1980s to the present, as discussed earlier in this report. However, the majority (approximately 75%) of districts still operate their own meal service. There has also been a movement toward serving healthier meals and—among some schools and districts—more scratch cooking. This has been supported by federal funding for school nutrition staff training since 1989 (discussed in the “Federal Funding for Training” section). Additional funding for school cafeteria equipment grants since 2010 has enabled more cooking in school and district kitchens. The federal government has also provided funding for farm-to-school programs. Schools and districts cooking from scratch still frequently rely on some pre-processed ingredients (e.g., shredded carrots), but they avoid frozen meals and box mixes. In addition, central kitchens—which are operated by districts and deliver meals to schools—have become increasingly common. This has shifted some food preparation jobs from schools to districts. Also, private-sector chefs have moved into school nutrition director positions in some districts.¹²⁰ All school foodservice staff—including food preparation, administrative, and frontline cafeteria workers—have had to adapt to new program requirements that were implemented following enactment of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-296), including updated nutrition standards for school meals, as well as changes to meal program operations during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹²¹

As discussed previously in this report, there has been limited research on the school nutrition workforce and the impact of federal policies on this workforce over time. While initially limited to spending on nutritionists, federal funding for school meals has supported various types of school foodservice staff since 1946. Other reforms to the programs have resulted in the transfer of some school foodservice jobs to private industry and shifted roles for staff as the extent of cooking in school and district kitchens has changed. School nutrition employees’ work experiences and labor market prospects have been and will likely continue to be affected by program trends and developments including federal funding levels and requirements, the degree of outsourcing within the programs, and the extent of cooking that takes place within school and district kitchens versus private sector facilities.

¹¹⁸ Levine 2008, pp. 152-163.

¹¹⁹ Gaddis 2019, pp. 100-103.

¹²⁰ See, for example, Hannah Natanson, “‘You’re chefs! This is a kitchen!’ It’s also a school cafeteria. That doesn’t mean the food has to be bland or frozen,” *Washington Post*, January 2, 2020.

¹²¹ For more information, see CRS Report R46234, *School Meals and Other Child Nutrition Programs: Background and Funding*.

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