

School Food Program: The Facts



The National School Lunch Program (NSLP)

The NSLP is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The program's limited funding is one reason public schools face greater challenges in providing healthy and interesting meals to students than private schools.

- Public schools have an average budget of about \$3 per student per lunch ([source](#)). About half of this amount goes to purchasing food, while the other half is spent on overhead costs like staff and utilities ([source](#)).
- The government supports the NSLP by reimbursing schools for the meals they serve, and through purchases of USDA raw commodity food items, which schools depend upon heavily—typically comprising 20% of the foods served. Many of these foods are the meats and cheeses purchased by the USDA's commodity program ([source](#)) which allows schools to ship directly to manufacturers in exchange for processed, finished products such as hamburgers and hot dogs ([source](#)). The program heavily subsidizes conventional milk, meat and cheese products—and encourages the purchase of highly processed, unhealthy meat products.
- Some schools and districts with very high percentages of low-income students offer “universal free meals.” These are often school districts serving predominantly non-white communities in [“food deserts,”](#) where it's especially important to provide healthy school meals. Allowing all students to eat lunch for free ensures all students have access to food while reducing social stigma and administrative costs. New York City just approved Universal Free Lunch.
 - Schools with universal free lunch may be some of the best places to start creating change, because the reduced fees allow the Food Service Directors more flexibility with their budgets and room for innovation around the food they serve.

Infrastructure and Capacity Challenges

- Due to decades of being underfunded by the USDA, many school cafeterias are equipped only with ovens for reheating food, and lack the equipment to cook meals from scratch.
- Some schools manage their own staff, while others contract with companies like Aramark and Sodexo that process foods like chicken, apples and cheese into chicken nuggets, pastries, pizza and other junk foods.
 - The Center for Science in the Public Interest [warned](#) in a New York Times Op-Ed that sending food to be processed often results in meals that have lower nutritional value and exceed national standards for saturated fat and sodium. A 2008 [report](#) by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that by the time many healthier commodities reach students, “they have about the same nutritional value as junk foods.”

Milk at School: Why is it Mandatory?

- Schools participating in the NSLP are required to offer milk and cannot restrict sales or marketing of it in any way. For example, schools can be cited for placing other beverages, such as water, on the lunch line ([source](#)) if it’s being offered in lieu of milk. Schools are allowed to offer certain brands of soy milk that are nutritionally equivalent to cow’s milk if they meet federal requirements ([source](#)), but students must have a written note from a medical professional to get it for free.
- According to one study, 47% of elementary school students and 30% of middle school students consume flavored milk ([source](#)). A single serving of chocolate milk contains between 4 and 6 teaspoons of sugar, more than the recommended daily limit of 3 teaspoons for young children ([source](#)).

- The journal *Pediatrics* published a review of 58 studies looking at dairy consumption and health. After looking at the evidence, the researchers concluded that “neither increased consumption of dairy products, specifically, nor total dietary calcium consumption has shown even a modestly consistent benefit for child or young adult bone health” ([source](#)).
- According to at least one study, drinking cow’s milk may even increase the risk of fractures. One study found that milk consumption was not associated with a decreased risk of fractures, while also showing 9% increase in risk for hip fractures in men for each additional glass of milk consumed during teenage years ([source](#)).
- Studies have shown a connection between cow’s milk protein and chronic constipation in children. In one study, eliminating all cow’s milk lead to 100% resolution ([source](#)), and another showed that removing fluid milk from the diet while continuing consumption of other dairy products resolved more than two-thirds of cases ([source](#)).

Racial Bias in School Lunch Programs

- Racial bias bolsters economic disparities in school districts across the country. More information [here](#) on how race influences school funding.
- Out-of-date USDA nutrition guidance reflects racial biases, with effects ranging from minor to life-threatening. Lactose intolerance is a normal condition affecting the majority of African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans and Native Americans, causing abdominal pain and diarrhea after milk consumption. However, federal rules require that all children produce a doctor’s note in order to obtain an alternative to cow’s milk in school food programs*.

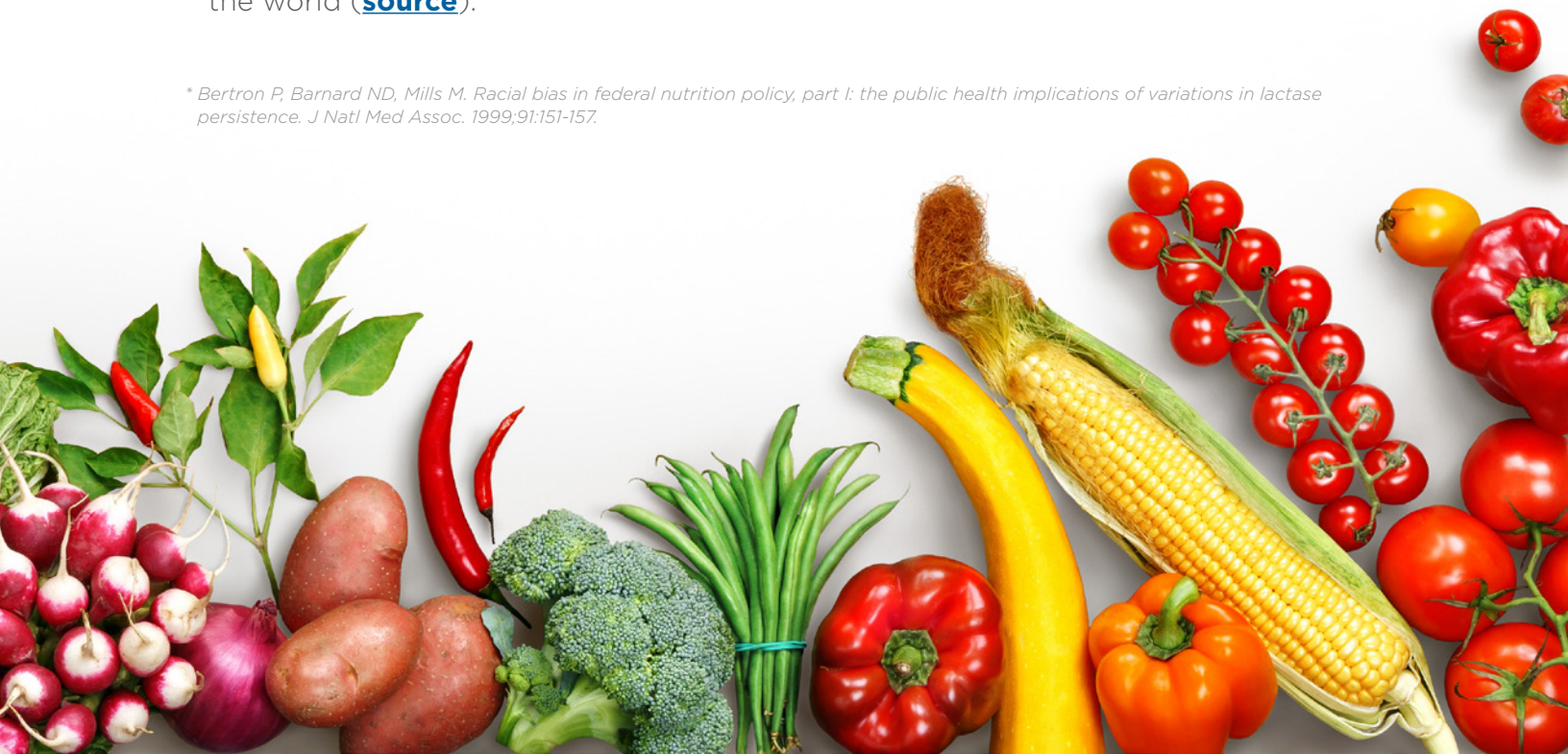
* Bertron P, Barnard ND, Mills M. Racial bias in federal nutrition policy, part I: the public health implications of variations in lactase persistence. *J Natl Med Assoc.* 1999;91:151-157.

- African Americans are at the highest risk of all racial groups for prostate cancer and colorectal cancer, which are strongly linked to dairy consumption and processed and red meat consumption, respectively*.

Health Benefits of Plant-Based Diets

- Studies show that children whose diets emphasize plant-based foods grow as tall or taller than their meat-eating peers and are less likely to suffer from obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease in adulthood ([source](#), [source](#)).
- Dietary habits start forming in childhood. Adult vegetarians tend to have lower rates of cancer ([source](#)). For example, one study found vegetarians' cancer rates to be 25-50% below average ([source](#)). Vegetarians are also less likely to die from heart disease than meat eaters ([source](#)).
- U.S. Dietary Guidelines 2015-2020 recommend reduced meat consumption, for young boys in particular. ([source](#))
- Meat-heavy diets are implicated in rapid growth in diet-related diseases around the world ([source](#)).

* Bertron P, Barnard ND, Mills M. Racial bias in federal nutrition policy, part I: the public health implications of variations in lactase persistence. *J Natl Med Assoc.* 1999;91:151-157.



Environmental Benefits

- According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, the rearing of livestock for meat, eggs, and milk generates at least 14.5% of total global greenhouse gas emissions, occupies 70% of agricultural land, and is the main agricultural cause of deforestation, biodiversity loss and land degradation and a major polluter of waterways ([source](#)).
- Beef generates 20 times more greenhouse gas emissions than beans, per gram of protein ([source](#)).
- Research has shown we cannot reach goals of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 without also reducing global meat consumption. Without this change, other efforts, such as energy-efficient transportation, solar panels, and clean energy, will not be enough ([source](#)).
- Today, more than a third of crops grown on the planet go to feeding livestock ([source](#)), even though 1 out of 9 people on Earth do not have enough food to lead a healthy active life ([source](#)).
- 17% of the world's freshwater is used for livestock production ([source](#)).
- It takes 4,068 gallons of water to produce 2 pounds of beef. Eating one cheeseburger uses about the same amount of water as watering the lawn and garden of a typical American home for 11 days* ([source](#)).
- 30% of biodiversity loss on land has been linked to animal agriculture.**

* Mekonnen MM, Hoekstra AY. A Global Assessment of the Water Footprint of Farm Animal Products. *Dep Water Eng Manag* [Internet]. 2012 [cited 2017 Sep 12]

** Westhoek, Henk; Rood T van, den Berg, Maurits ; Janse, Jan; Nijdam, Durk; Reudink, Melchert; Stehfest E. *The Protein Puzzle* [Internet]. 2011 [cited 2017 Sep 12].

Links and resources cited in this doc

Public schools budget about \$3 per student per lunch:

<http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2016/are-you-school-lunch-savvy>

Public school spending: <https://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520269880>

USDA's commodity program: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/fdd/NSLP-White-Paper.pdf>

Heavily processed foods: <https://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520269880>

Non-white community food deserts: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/12/food-swamps/549275/>

Processed foods have lower nutritional value: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/04/opinion/sunday/school-lunches-and-the-food-industry.html>

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation report: https://cfpa.net/ChildNutrition/ChildNutrition_ExternalPublications/CommoditiesSchoolMeals-PolicyHighlight-RWJF-2008.pdf

Schools can be cited for placing water on the lunch line: <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/42/1758>

Serving cow's milk equivalents: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2018-title7-vol4/xml/CFR-2018-title7-vol4-sec210-10.xml>

Consumption of flavored milk: <http://uconnruddcenter.org/files/Pdfs/Student%20Acceptance%20of%20Plain%20Milk%20study.pdf>

Chocolate milk contains 4-6 teaspoons of sugar: <https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2015/11/milk-companies-market-schools-fast-food/>

Consuming dairy products has no consistent bone health benefit: <https://tinyurl.com/y99ogv8a>

Cow's milk may increase the risk of fractures: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3983667/>

Connection between cow's milk protein and chronic constipation in children: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23340316>

Removing fluid milk from the diet resolved more than two-thirds of cases: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9770556>

How race influences school funding: <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/09/public-school-funding-and-the-role-of-race/408085/>

Plant-based kids grow taller: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9023462>

Plant-based kids are healthier: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19083442>

Adult vegetarians tend to have lower rates of cancer: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19562864>

Vegetarians' cancer rates to be 25-50% below average: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/1391130>

Vegetarians are also less likely to die from heart disease than meat eaters: <https://www.bmj.com/content/308/6945/1667>.

U.S. Dietary Guidelines 2015-2020 recommend reduced meat consumption: <https://tinyurl.com/mnucjwl>

Meat-heavy diets are implicated in rapid diet-related disease growth: <https://tinyurl.com/ybgtmbb7>

Livestock's impact on climate: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/010/a0701e/a0701e00.HTM>

Beef generates 20 times more greenhouse gas emissions than beans: <http://www.wri.org/publication/shifting-diets>

We cannot reach goals of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 without reducing global meat consumption: <https://tinyurl.com/ycst93yt>

Today, more than a third of crops go to feeding livestock: <http://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/8/3/034015/pdf>

1 out of 9 people on Earth do not have enough food to lead a healthy life: <http://www.foodaidfoundation.org/world-hunger-statistics.html>

17% of the world's freshwater is used for livestock production: <http://waterfootprint.org/media/downloads/Report-48-WaterFootprint-AnimalProducts-Vol1.pdf>

It takes 4,068 gallons of water to produce 2 pounds of beef: <https://www.epa.gov/watersense/outdoors>

For a clickable list, visit: <https://omdfortheplanet.com/school-program-facts/>