A Closer Look at Discretionary Spending

Spending that lawmakers control annually through appropriation acts

At a Glance

Discretionary outlays by the federal government in 2021: $1.6 Trillion

Outlays for nondefense programs, which accounted for more than half of the discretionary total, in 2021: $0.9 Trillion

Discretionary outlays in 2021: 7.3% of GDP

Average annual discretionary outlays between 2001 and 2020: 7.3% of GDP

Trends in Discretionary Outlays

Percentage of GDP

Discretionary Outlays

$1.6 Trillion

Nondefense $895 Billion

Defense $742 Billion

Discretionary outlays include outlays for national defense, the Department of Homeland Security, and other activities; outlays for national security, research, and development; outlays for social insurance programs; and outlays for economic adjustment assistance and other activities.

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Trends in Discretionary Outlays

Percentage of GDP

GDP = gross domestic product.