

The WIC Program

Background, Trends, and Issues

Victor Oliveira
Elizabeth Racine
Jennifer Olmsted
Linda M. Ghelfi

Introduction

The mission of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is to safeguard the health of low-income women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk, by providing nutritious foods to supplement diets, nutrition education, and referrals to health care and other social services. WIC is based on the premise that early intervention programs during critical times of growth and development can help prevent future medical and developmental problems. Administered by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the program provides grants for supplemental foods, nutrition services, and administration to 88 WIC State agencies, including the 50 States, the District of Columbia, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and 33 Indian Tribal Organizations.

Since its establishment in 1972, WIC has grown rapidly while becoming one of the central components of the Nation's food assistance system. In fiscal 2000, WIC served an average of 7.2 million participants per month (USDA, 2001c). Almost half of all infants and about one-quarter of all children 1-4 years of age in the United States now participate in the program.

Federal program costs totaled almost \$4 billion in fiscal 2000, making WIC the country's third-largest food and nutrition assistance program in terms of total expenditures, trailing only the Food Stamp Program (\$17.1 billion) and the National School Lunch Program (\$6.1 billion) (USDA, 2001c). WIC accounts for almost 12 percent of the total Federal Government expenditures for food and nutrition assistance.

WIC experienced many significant changes as it evolved into the current program. As a mature program, it continues to face a number of issues. How the WIC community responds to these issues may have a large impact on the program's future operation.

This report has two primary objectives. The first is to present comprehensive background information on the WIC program, specifically how it works, its history, program trends, and the characteristics of the population it serves. The second is to examine a number of issues currently facing the program, specifically those related to program outcomes and program administration. In addition, descriptions of ongoing WIC-related research being conducted by USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) and Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) are presented in the appendix.