

Third National Survey of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Participants (NSWP-III) (Summary)

Background

The National Survey of WIC Participants (NSWP) study series is designed to describe State and local agency characteristics, examine participants' characteristics, assess participants' experiences with WIC, and estimate improper payments resulting from certification errors in WIC. The study is conducted approximately every 10 years, and the current study is the third iteration (NSWP-III) in the series.

This summary highlights selected findings from 10 Brief Reports.

Reports 1-3 – State and Local WIC Agency Operations

- Brief Report 1 explores State agency policies and operations.
- Brief Report 2 describes local agency operations.
- Brief Report 3 reports on local agency certification policies.

Reports 4-7 – Participant Characteristics, Retention, Experiences, and Satisfaction

- Brief Report 4 explores State and local agency policies on reporting and calculating retention rates and barriers to participation.
- Brief Report 5 discusses participant demographic characteristics.
- Brief Report 6 assesses participant satisfaction and the factors that influence WIC food purchases.
- Brief Report 7 discusses participants' health insurance coverage and participation in other nutrition assistance programs.

Reports 8-10 – Certification Errors, Denials, and Improper Payments

- Brief Report 8 estimates case error rates, certification error rates, and dollar error rates.
- Brief Report 9 provides information on denied applicants.
- Brief Report 10 examines factors associated with certification error and retention of WIC participants.

Key Findings

- Only 17 percent of State agencies reported that their WIC information system was connected to other programs' systems, such as Medicaid or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).
- Fifty-seven percent of WIC participants reported that they purchased all WIC foods prescribed.
- Over 95 percent of participants reported they were satisfied with staff customer service, staff knowledge, and staff's ability to speak their language.
- Most State (70 percent) and local agencies (84 percent) indicated they did not calculate participant retention rates.
- Two-thirds of current WIC participants who previously participated in the program reported that they were still eligible for WIC benefits when they left.
- Two-thirds of WIC participants reported that they or members of their family were currently receiving food from at least one other nutrition assistance program.
- Of those who could have participated in the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP), 47 percent of participants reported participating in that program.
- The overall case error rate was estimated at 2.5 percent, and the overall post-rebate dollar error rate due to income ineligibility was estimated to be 1.1 percent.

Methods

Data were collected from the following sources during the summer and fall of 2019:

- a web survey administered to all 89 WIC State agencies (unweighted $n = 82$),
- a web survey administered to a nationally representative sample of local agencies (unweighted $n = 714$),
- an in-person survey administered to WIC applicants who formally applied and were denied certification (unweighted $n = 86$)¹,
- an in-person survey administered to a nationally representative sample of recently certified WIC participants within 8 weeks of certification (unweighted $n = 1,697$),
- a telephone or in-person survey administered to a nationally representative sample of current WIC participants (unweighted $n = 1,648$), and
- a telephone interview with a convenience sample of former WIC participants (unweighted $n = 125$).

When possible, data are weighted to produce national estimates. Details on the study's weighting procedures are found in Appendixes A, B, and D.

Findings From Brief Reports 1 to 3—State and Local WIC Agency Operations

WIC State and local agencies greatly vary in size and number of participants served (Brief 1). On average, State agencies reported overseeing 24 local agencies; however, the actual number ranged from 0 to 118 local agencies per State agency, with a total of 1,930 local agencies across 89 State agencies. Local agencies reported overseeing from 0 to 96 clinics or sites and 4 to 200,000 participants. The mean number of WIC clinics/sites per State Agency was 74, with half of State Agencies reporting more than 37 clinics/sites (Table 1).

¹ As the response rate was particularly low for this survey (less than 20%) and data on the population of denied applicants is lacking,

Table 1. Number of WIC Clinics/Sites in State Agencies ^a

WIC Clinics or Sites	2009 (n)	2019 (n)
Mean number per State agency	91	74
Median number per State agency	53	37
Range per State agency	0-625	0-572
^a In 2009, 82 of the 90 State agencies participated in NSWP-II, and in 2019, 81 of the 89 State agencies participated in NSWP-III.		

At least 98 percent of local agencies reported that the typical clinic has the necessary equipment onsite to (1) enter or access client certification information on a computer, (2) take anthropometric measurements, and (3) perform hematological testing (Brief 2). The percentage of local agencies with the necessary equipment to enter or access client certification information and to take anthropometric measurements were statistically similar between 2009 and 2019. The percentage of local agencies with the necessary equipment to perform hematological testing increased from 89 percent in 2009 to 98 percent in 2019.

Nearly all local agencies (98 percent) rated their physical location as very safe (no incidents) or safe (occasional minor incidents) (Brief 2). Over half of local agencies (53 percent) indicated their agency's location was very safe, 44 percent indicated the location was safe, and the remaining 2.5 percent indicated the location was unsafe (occasional major incidents or frequent minor incidents). No local agencies reported their location as very unsafe (frequent major incidents).

Approximately three-fourths (74 percent) of local agencies reported that their certification staff were cross-trained on all certification-related tasks (Brief 3). Certification-related tasks include assessing categorical eligibility criteria, assessing residential eligibility criteria, assessing nutritional risk criteria, assessing income/adjunctive income eligibility, and issuing benefits (vouchers/EBT cards). In local agencies that cross-trained

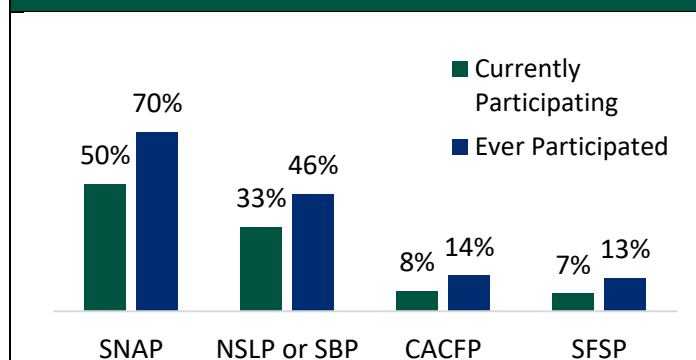
these results should be interpreted with caution and are not reported in this research summary.

staff, an average of 81 percent of certification staff were cross-trained. Cross-training staff can help create operational efficiencies by ensuring that all staff have the skills necessary to step in and support the various functions of the WIC site when needed.

Half of local agencies (50 percent) offered certifications at alternative sites (Brief 3). Alternative sites include satellites (temporary sites); mobile units; or offsite clinics at a hospital, school, or other locations. Of those that offered certifications at alternative sites, most (90 percent) conducted certifications for all certification categories. Certifications for infants were provided at alternative sites for 96 percent of local agencies, followed by certifications for postpartum women (95 percent), breastfeeding women (94 percent), pregnant women (93 percent), and children (92 percent). Alternative sites can help increase the accessibility to WIC.

Only 14 of the 82 responding State agencies (17 percent) reported that their recordkeeping systems for WIC were connected to those of other programs, such as Medicaid and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (Brief 1). Of these, 11 reported that their recordkeeping systems were connected to Medicaid, 7 reported a connection to the recordkeeping system for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), and 5 reported connection to TANF. These findings suggest that many State agencies could benefit from technology enhancements to their record-keeping systems and additional resources necessary to implement data matching across programs.

Figure 1. Percentage of participants or family members participating in other FNS programs



Notes: Weighted n = 6,397,412; Unweighted n = 1,648. SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, NSLP = National School Lunch Program, SBP = School Breakfast Program, CACFP = Child and Adult Care Food Program, and SFSP= Summer Food Service Program.

Findings From Brief Reports 4 to 7— Participant Characteristics, Retention, Experiences, and Satisfaction

Slightly over half of WIC participants (57 percent) reported that they purchased all WIC foods prescribed (Brief 5). In 2019, 57 percent of WIC participants reported purchasing all WIC food items in their food package. Of the participants who did not purchase all food items prescribed, the primary reason for this (shared by 64 percent) was that they did not like those food items. The factors rated by WIC participants as very important in their decision to purchase a food item included nutritional content (84 percent), availability in the store (78 percent), and taste (78 percent).

Over 95 percent of WIC participants were very or somewhat satisfied with staff customer service, staff knowledge, and staff's ability to speak their language (Brief 6). More than 90 percent of WIC participants were very or somewhat satisfied with the safety of the WIC clinic location and the convenience of the WIC clinic location. When participants were asked about the certification process, 81 percent responded that they were very satisfied and 15 percent somewhat satisfied with how WIC staff handle certifications; 64 percent were very satisfied and 25 percent somewhat satisfied with wait time. Further, most participants provided a rating of very good or excellent to questions on whether their food benefits included nutritious foods (80 percent), provided the right amount of food (70 percent), and included their preferred foods (66 percent). Of note, among participants who reported receiving too little of any WIC food item, half (50 percent) reported receiving not enough fruits and vegetables. No more than 20 percent of WIC participants reported receiving too little of any of the other WIC food items.

Most State (70 percent) and local agencies (84 percent) indicated they did not calculate retention rates (Brief 4). Among those that did calculate retention, definitions of retention differed. This suggests a need to work towards developing a standard definition of retention.

Two-thirds (66 percent) of current WIC participants who previously participated in the program reported that they were still eligible for WIC benefits when they left (Brief 4). Among these participants, 18 percent reported better scheduling options (lunchtime or evening/weekend appointments) offered by WIC as the top reason that could have encouraged them to stay in the program. The next most common response, provided by 10 percent of participants, was for WIC to provide better information on

how to receive benefits when the participant moved to a new city or State.

Most WIC participants (66 percent) reported that they or members of their family were currently receiving food from at least one other food assistance program (Brief 7). Half of participants (50 percent) reported that they or members of their family currently received food from SNAP and one-third (33 percent) currently received meals from the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) or School Breakfast Program (SBP) (see Figure 1).

Of those who could have participated in the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP), 47 percent of participants reported participating in that program (Brief 6). Of those, approximately half (52 percent) rated the program as excellent. Of those who did not participate in FMNP, the top two reasons for not participating were that the farmers' market was in an inconvenient/unknown location (22 percent) and participants did not know about the program (18 percent).

Findings from Reports 8-10 – Certification Errors, Denials, and Improper Payments

The overall case error rate was estimated at 2.5 percent (Brief 8). Case error refers to the number of WIC participants who were certified to receive WIC benefits but who were not eligible for these benefits. Among the 1,697 certifications reviewed, 37 errors were identified. Income eligibility error (2.1 percent of all certifications) accounted for 31 of the case errors. Residence error, categorical error, and identity error also contributed to the overall case error rate, but the number of errors of some error types were too small to estimate a reliable error rate. The estimated pre-rebate annualized dollar error rate due to income eligibility error was 1.7 percent, and the estimated post-rebate annualized dollar error rate due to income eligibility error was 1.1 percent.

These national estimates of annual improper payments assist the USDA in fulfilling obligations to report improper payments. These estimates were made while operating under the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Improvement Act (IPERIA) of 2012. In March 2020, the President signed into law the Payment Integrity Information Act (PIIA) of 2019. This law repealed and

replaced IPERIA and its predecessors but did not alter the requirement to produce statistically valid estimates of improper payments in WIC, or an estimate that is otherwise appropriate using a methodology approved by the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, of the improper payments made under the program or activity. Improper payments are any payments that should not have been made, or that were made in an incorrect amount, under statutory, contractual, administrative, or other legally applicable requirements.

About 11 percent of local agencies did not retain information on applicants denied participation in WIC (Brief 9). Among local agencies that did not retain information on denied applicants, 25 percent reported that their agency did not retain this information because denials were rare or denials were made over the telephone through an informal screening process and applicant information was not retained. Other frequently reported reasons for not retaining information on denied applicants were that a letter was given to the applicant (18 percent), or that system limitations made it so that they could not access data or run reports on denials (9 percent).

New applicant and current participant denials were extremely rare (Brief 9). The majority of local agencies reported that 1 percent or fewer new applicants (67 percent) and 1 percent or fewer current participants (65 percent) were deemed ineligible and denied services in the last 12 months. On average, across all local agencies, the majority of new applicant denials (65 percent) and current participant past denials (60 percent) were attributed to income ineligibility.

For More Information:

Magness, A., et al. (2021). *Third National Survey of WIC Participants (NSWP-III): Brief Reports 1-10*. Prepared by Capital Consulting Corporation and 2M Research Services. Contract No. AG-3198-K-15-0077. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Karen Castellanos-Brown. Available online at: www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.

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