

National- and State-Level Estimates of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Eligibility and WIC Program Reach in 2019 (Summary)

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides food, nutrition education, breastfeeding promotion and support, and referrals to health care and social services to nutritionally at-risk pregnant women, new mothers, infants, and children up to age 5 living at low incomes.

This report offers national and State estimates of the number of people eligible for WIC benefits and the percent of the eligible population participating in 2019, including estimates by participant category. The report also provides estimates by region, by U.S. State and territory, and by race and ethnicity.

Due to methodological changes in the underlying datasets used to produce the WIC eligibility estimates, this report should not be directly compared with estimates from previous WIC eligibility reports.

Key Findings

- The average monthly WIC-eligible population totaled 10.99 million in Calendar Year (CY) 2019.
- In the average month of 2019, WIC served an estimated 57.4 percent of those eligible for WIC.
- The coverage rate for WIC-eligible infants was highest among WIC participant subgroups in 2019.
- Coverage rates were highest for Hispanic (67 percent) and Black non-Hispanic (62 percent) WIC-eligible individuals.

Methods

The national estimates are based on a methodology developed in 2003 by the Committee on National Statistics of the National Research Council. The report's State-level estimates use a methodology originally developed by the Urban Institute. These methodologies use data from various sources, including the Community Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS-ASEC) and the American Community Survey (ACS).

The estimates of program eligibility consider poverty level, adjunctive income eligibility (e.g., due to participation in the USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)), national estimates of nutritional risk, and national- and State-level estimates of duration of breastfeeding. The estimates of program reach or coverage are derived using the USDA, Food and Nutrition Service's (FNS) administrative data on the average monthly number of program participants divided by the average monthly number of individuals estimated to be eligible for the program. Standard errors are included to estimate precision.

As discussed in detail in the [2018 WIC Eligibility Report](#), beginning with the 2019 CPS-ASEC, the U.S. Census Bureau used new data processing procedures that included more accurate information on health insurance coverage and household income. Consequently, this change led to a break in the series with past estimates.

Furthermore, under the new processing procedures, infants ages 0–3 months can no longer be estimated as adjunctively income-eligible for WIC via Medicaid only. For the 2019 estimates, the study team identified a method for imputing Medicaid eligibility for infants ages 0–3 months in the 2020 CPS-ASEC to create a more complete estimate of infants eligible for WIC in 2019. The study team also implemented this imputation for the 2016–2018 estimates presented in this report; therefore, **the 2016–2018 estimates of WIC eligibility are approximately 1% higher in this report than in the previous report** (see Appendix E). The revised estimates for 2016–2018 are within the margin of error for the 2016–2018 estimates published in the 2018 WIC Eligibility Report.

Findings

The average monthly WIC-eligible population totaled 10.99 million in Calendar Year (CY) 2019, a decrease from the revised estimate of 11.99 million in 2018. Concurrently, program participation decreased at a slightly lower rate.

In the average month of 2019, WIC served an estimated 57.4 percent of those eligible for WIC, an increase from the revised estimate for 2018 (56.3 percent). The percentage of the eligible population that receives WIC benefits is the program's "coverage rate."

The coverage rate for WIC-eligible infants (98 percent) was highest among WIC participant subgroups in 2019, while the coverage rate for WIC-eligible children (45 percent) continued to be lower than other groups.

Coverage rates for children were consistently the lowest.

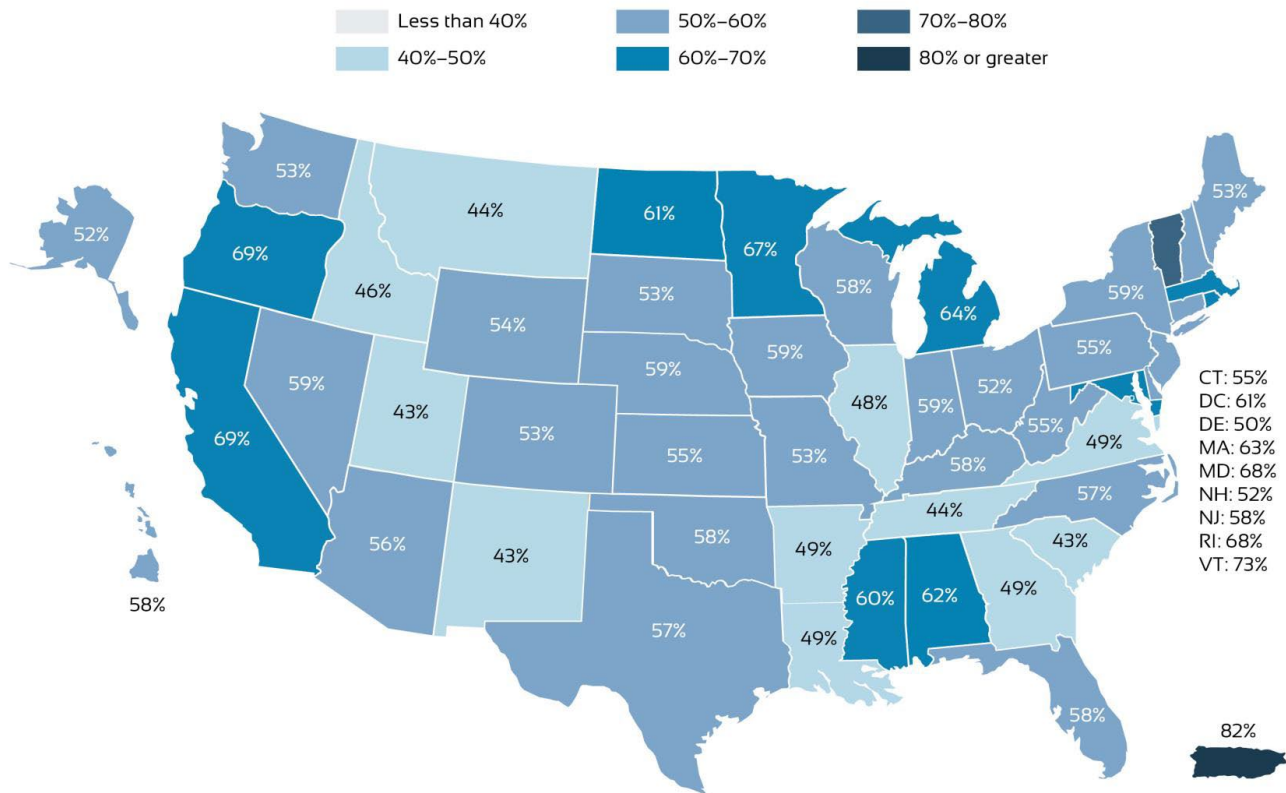
Coverage rates vary substantially by State, as demonstrated by the map below. (Note: Confidence intervals around estimates for States with small populations are larger than for other States, so differences between States and across years may be less pronounced than they appear in the map.)

WIC Eligibility and Coverage Rate by Subgroup, CY 2019				
WIC Participant Category	# Eligible (Millions)	% of All Eligible	# Participating (Millions)	Coverage Rate
Infants	1.62	14.7%	1.59	98.4%
Total Children	7.20	65.5%	3.22	44.8%
Children Age 1	1.70	15.4%	1.10	64.9%
Children Age 2	1.79	16.3%	0.87	48.5%
Children Age 3	1.78	16.2%	0.78	43.7%
Children Age 4	1.93	17.5%	0.47	24.5%
Pregnant Women	1.07	9.7%	0.56	52.3%
Total Postpartum Women	1.11	10.1%	0.94	84.7%
Breastfeeding Women	0.74	6.8%	0.51	68.4%
Non-breastfeeding Women	0.37	3.3%	0.43	†
All Participants	10.99	100.0%	6.31	57.4%
† indicates an unreliable coverage rate over 100% with the lower bound of a 95-percent confidence interval above 100				
CY=Calendar Year				
WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children				

Coverage rates were highest for Hispanic (67 percent) and non-Hispanic Black (62 percent) WIC-eligible individuals, and lowest for non-Hispanic White WIC-eligible individuals (46 percent). Among pregnant women eligible for WIC, racial and ethnic differences in coverage rates were smaller (58 percent among Hispanic, 54 percent among non-Hispanic Black, and 47 percent among non-Hispanic White).

The relative order of coverage rates by participant category has remained consistent from CY 2005 to CY 2019, despite the re-estimation of the series. Across all years, coverage rates were highest for infants, followed by those for postpartum women and pregnant women.

WIC Coverage Rates for All Participants by State, Calendar Year 2019



WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

For More Information:

Gray K., Balch-Crystal E., Giannarelli, L., and Johnson, P. (2022). National- and State-Level Estimates of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Eligibility and WIC Program Reach in 2019. Prepared by Insight Policy Research, Contract No AG-3198-D-16-0095. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: COR Grant Lovellette. Available online at: www.fns.usda.gov/research-analysis.

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