



National WIC Association



Forecasting WIC Funding Needs

*Supporting Families,
Strengthening Access*

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Contributions and acknowledgments

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Abstract

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is a key component of the Nation's safety net, providing needed nutrition and health services to young children and their families. Although the program has received bipartisan support, being able to accurately project WIC funding needs remains critical for program planning and advocacy efforts. The objective of the current project is to build a forecasting model that estimates national WIC funding needs under current and proposed policy conditions for fiscal year (FY) 2027. The study team, which included all authors, identified a Prophet model to forecast monthly WIC participation and associated funding needs using a combination of a priori assumptions and machine learning tools. The model forecasted an average of 7.14 million WIC participants each month of FY 2027 (95% confidence interval: 6.95 million, 7.34 million), corresponding to a projected budget need of \$8.55 billion dollars for the year. The projected budget is above both the proposed President's and House of Representative's budgets, suggesting the proposed budgets would require WIC to turn away eligible families. Proposed reductions to the cash-value benefit (CVB) for fruits and vegetables, one of the most valued aspects of the WIC program, would at least partially mitigate the potential shortfall but may also lead to families leaving the program. The use of this forecasting model will be critical in coming years to understand how policy and practice changes impact funding needs. The effects of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (also known as H.R. 1) on programs conferring WIC adjunctive income eligibility and changes to formula rebates may further affect WIC participation and budgetary needs for providing WIC services to all interested eligible families.

Project introduction and objectives

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is a key component of the nation's safety net, providing needed nutrition and health services to young children and their families. Established in 1972, WIC has long received bipartisan support at the federal level, and the program has been fully funded to support all eligible individuals who seek to participate in WIC since the late 1990s. In a complex and dynamic policy environment, it is more important than ever to understand the budget needed to deliver WIC to all potential participants. This project introduces a new forecasting tool to predict future WIC funding needs, examines the likely participation and policy impact of proposals to reduce the WIC budget, and summarizes policy implications of the project findings.

About WIC

WIC provides nutritious foods, nutrition education that includes breastfeeding promotion and support, and referrals to health and social services. To be eligible for WIC, an applicant must be a pregnant or postpartum woman, an infant up to age 1, or a child aged 1–4. Applicants must be at nutritional risk¹ and have a household income less than or equal to 185% of the federal poverty guidelines issued annually by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Applicants may also be adjunctively income eligible for WIC if they participate in Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

WIC funding process

WIC is a discretionary program and obtains funding from Congress through the annual appropriations process. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) determines the budget request and submits it to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for consideration as part of the President's Budget Request. The Senate and House Appropriations Committees of the U.S. Congress determine WIC appropriations to USDA (National WIC Association, 2018).

State agencies administer WIC, and USDA provides them with quarterly Food grants and Nutrition Services and Administration (NSA) grants. State agencies use Food grants to provide food package benefits and use NSA grants for program management and all other WIC services, including nutrition education and breastfeeding promotion and support.

USDA uses a funding formula prescribed by WIC statute and regulations to determine the amount of funding each State agency receives for Food grants and NSA grants. Whereas Food grants depend directly on the cost of food and the number of participants, NSA grants are determined by recent caseloads with adjustments for cost differences, program type, minimum funding requirements, and national appropriations constraints (Food and Nutrition Service [FNS], 1999, 56674). More specifically, the NSA is based on the prior year's NSA allocation and adjusted for

¹ Nutrition risks include health conditions related to nutrition (e.g., over- or underweight, anemia), dietary deficiencies, or other conditions that affect an individual's likelihood of having a nutritious diet.

expected inflation. NSA funds are then distributed to State agencies based on their expected caseload and operational adjustments.²

WIC food package contents drive WIC food costs. Milk, cash-value benefit (CVB) for fruits and vegetables, and infant formula account for the highest share of food package costs. In recent years, the CVB amount increased from \$10 for children and \$13 for women to \$26 for children and up to \$52 for women. Infant formula remains a major program cost despite the mandatory cost containment policy that requires State agencies to conduct a competitive bidding process and enter into single-source contracts with manufacturers that provide rebates. In 2018, infant formula accounted for 18% of post-rebate WIC food costs (Kline, Meyers Mathieu, & Marr, 2020). The 2024 final rule to revise the WIC food package reduced milk allocations. However, in recent months, the allocation was reversed to prior levels. Other external (and hard-to-predict) factors influence the price of the food benefits. For example, in fiscal year (FY) 2025, the cost of eggs increased dramatically due to avian flu, leading to higher-than-average costs associated with that benefit.

Project objective, purpose, and goals

The primary objective of this project is to build a forecasting model that estimates national WIC funding needs under current and proposed policy conditions for FY 2027 and beyond. A WIC forecasting model is essential because of WIC's distinct funding process. Congress allocates a capped amount of funds each fiscal year based on estimated costs. Estimation procedures consider many factors, including the likely number of participants, salaries for WIC Local and State agency staff, food costs, and more.

WIC funding has been more difficult to predict in recent years because of changes in participation trends and higher than usual variation in grocery prices. Following years of consistent declines in WIC participation, the number of WIC participants increased steadily from FY 2022 through September 2025. During this period of increasing participation, USDA struggled to provide accurate projections of funding needs to Congress. In FY 2024, the President's Budget Request fell short of projected needs by approximately \$1 billion, requiring Congress to revise its proposal part way through the appropriations process. Then, starting in October 2025, coinciding with an unprecedented 6-week federal government shutdown, WIC caseload steeply declined. The sudden shift in participation trends affects the ability of federal, State, local, and nonprofit WIC partners to model participation and estimate funding needs.

WIC has been fully funded by Congress since FY 1997, meaning that enough funds have been appropriated to meet the estimated cost of serving all eligible families interested in participating. In recent years, policymakers have proposed cutting benefits or reducing overall program funding levels. Proposed budget cuts and policy changes could jeopardize the program's ability to serve all eligible and interested women, infants, and children. Precise forecasts of WIC participation and

² See 7 CFR 246.16 (c)(2) for additional detail.

funding requirements will help guarantee that every eligible family seeking assistance can access WIC services.

The project team established these goals to develop the forecasting model:

- Identify key variables that influence funding needs.
- Compile and analyze historical data to inform model development.
- Use the model to simulate funding scenarios and assess WIC's capacity to serve eligible populations under different funding levels, including estimates for total participants by participant category (women, infants, and children).
- Apply model outputs to inform policy recommendations and support targeted advocacy and partner engagement.
- Develop an adaptable version of the model to enable future projections.

Methods to predict WIC funding needs

Time series analyses include statistical models that examine trends, seasonal patterns, and other patterns in the data to predict future values of an outcome (Ostrom, 1990).

The study team approached forecasting in two stages. During the first stage, the team developed a machine learning time series model to forecast WIC participation using past WIC participation. During the second stage, the study team projected the total funds needed to serve the forecasted number of WIC participants. The projections

incorporated the statutory requirements the Food and Nutrition Administration (FNA) uses to predict funding needs. Key assumptions included the following:

- **There is no change in the likelihood that an eligible person will choose to participate in the program.** The choice to participate in WIC likely depends on State agency and federal WIC policies and practices, individual preferences, social and economic conditions (e.g., WIC participation may increase in response to higher grocery prices or during periods of higher unemployment), and policies that affect programs conferring adjunctive income eligibility.
- **The uninflated cost of the revised WIC food package is the same as the cost of the prior package.** All increases to the cost of the food package are based on inflation projections published by the Congressional Budget Office.³

³ See also National WIC Association (2024).

- **There are no unexpected shocks to the WIC program and WIC participation.** See the [Recommendations and Implications for Policy section](#) for some concerns about how this assumption may be violated because of the 2025 federal government shutdown and a possible change in WIC participation trends.
- **The projections do not assume that any funds will be carried forward from the prior fiscal year.** In recent years, funds remaining from the prior fiscal year have been a critical source of funding for WIC program activities through the program's back spend authority. Based on recent years, it is likely that FY 2026 will have funds that can be carried into FY 2027. However, discounting these funds could lead to shortfalls in the budget for FY 2027 if the back-spend estimate is incorrect. Even if the estimated procedure leads to more funds available for FY 2027 than the program ultimately needs, the study team's approach will minimize the risks of budget shortfalls for FY 2028 by allowing for those funds to be spent forward.

Data sources

The study team used publicly available sources of monthly data for the period of FY 2021 through January 2026. This window was selected based on data availability and recency. The team prioritized more recent data because they best represent the expected political and economic environment for FY 2027 (months that need to be forecasted).

Outcome measures

For the machine learning model (stage 1), the primary outcome is WIC participation. The model uses prior observations of WIC participation to forecast future participation. The study team measured monthly WIC participation using publicly available WIC administrative data (FNA, 2026b) derived from State agency FNS-798 reporting (see callout box), which provides aggregate totals and counts by participant categories.

The FNS-798, or WIC Financial Management and Participation Report, is a monthly report completed by WIC State agencies. It includes the total number of monthly participants, food costs, and NSA costs, among other financial information.

For the projected total funds needed to serve the forecasted total number of WIC participants (stage 2), the primary outcome is projected WIC funding needs. FNA publishes WIC food and NSA cost data (FNA, 2026b). State agencies report monthly WIC food costs through the FNS-798 form. The publicly available data provide cumulative NSA costs. For each fiscal year, the study team divided the annual NSA costs by 12 to estimate monthly NSA costs.

Predictors

Table 1 lists the predictors the study team collected and considered for WIC participation models. The team selected candidate predictors believed to affect the overall population of women, infants, and children; affect the total population of individuals eligible for WIC through income eligibility or adjunctive income eligibility; or account for inflation when modeling food and NSA costs.

Table 1. WIC participation model predictors and data sources

Variable	Definition	Source	Limitations
Births	Count of births	National Vital Statistics System (CDC, 2026) ^a	N/A
Births to women enrolled in WIC	Count of births where the woman noted that she participated in WIC on the birth certificate	National Vital Statistics System (CDC, 2026) ^a	Self-reported measure
SNAP participation	Counts of all SNAP participants	Administrative data (FNA, 2026a)	N/A
Medicaid participation	Counts of all Medicaid participants	MBES data (CMS, 2026)	Monthly data only available through June 2025
Immigration	Counts of immigrants to the United States	CBO's Demographic Outlook (CBO, 2026a)	Only annual measures available; assumed the annual total was distributed equally across 12 months
Unemployment	Counts of unemployed individuals and seasonally adjusted unemployment rates	CPS (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2026d; Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2026e)	Missing data for October 2025 because of the federal government shutdown
U.S. GDP	GDP, in billions of dollars	U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2026b)	Only quarterly measures available; assumed the quarterly total was distributed equally across 3 months
CPI	Measure of inflation based on households' direct purchases	U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2026a)	N/A
PCEPI	Measure of inflation based on households' consumption (e.g., includes costs paid by health insurance)	U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2026c)	N/A
Inflation	Percent inflation	CBO, 2026b	Available annually

Note. CBO = Congressional Budget Office; CDC = Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; CMS = Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services; CPI = Consumer Price Index; CPS = Current Population Survey; FNS = Food and Nutrition Service; GDP = gross domestic product; MBES = Medicaid Budget and Expenditure System; N/A = not applicable; PCEPI = Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index; SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

^a The study team accessed National Vital Statistics System data through the CDC WONDER website.

Stage 1: Develop and test WIC participation model

To develop the WIC participation model, the study team reviewed correlations among potential predictors, identified final sets of predictors, used a machine learning procedure to fit and test candidate models, and compared model performance across predictor sets. Upon selecting the final model, the study team examined model performance and forecasted WIC participation through FY 2027.

Refine candidate predictors before modeling

The study team examined correlations among possible predictors to assess collinearity and guide model selection (see **Appendix A**). In response to observed collinearity, the study team implemented elastic net regularization, a linear regression approach used to account for multicollinearity and recommend a set of predictors (Zou & Hastie, 2005). The study team also considered *a priori* recommendations from subject matter experts on which variables to include.

Through this process, the study team identified a parsimonious group of variables for inclusion in the model, reducing the risk of overfitting the model to the specifics of the testing period. This approach also minimizes future data collection burden for model updates. As a point of comparison, the study team also considered a model without predictors, relying only on past values and trends in WIC participation to forecast future values.

Develop candidate models of WIC participation

For each potential set of predictor variables, including the model without predictors, the study team implemented machine learning methods to consider an array of candidate models of WIC participation. Machine learning optimizes predictive accuracy by efficiently fitting many predictive models and calculating model fit statistics. The study team generated models using WesLytics, Westat's data platform built on Databricks, to manage, engineer, and analyze data. Within this platform, the study team implemented the MLflow package, an open-source program developed by Databricks, to track and compare models (Zaharia et al., 2018).

Partition data for model training and testing and assess performance

Machine learning models require dividing available data into training and test data. Training data are used to develop the model. Analysts use the test data to assess the model's performance at forecasting estimates (i.e., the forecasted values can be compared with observed values). The study team considered using a 6-month test period to prioritize the use of recent data in the training dataset. However, the study aims to predict funding needs for the entirety of FY 2027. Using less than 12 months of test data restricted the model's ability to assess and account for seasonal patterns in WIC participation. As a result, the study team chose to assess candidate models using a full year of test data. Training data months were October 2020 to January 2025; test data months were February 2025 to January 2026.

After using the training data to develop the model, the study team forecasted WIC participation for all test data months and then compared the predicted and actual WIC participation in each month. To reflect the uncertainty of predicted participation values, the study team calculated a 95% confidence interval around each monthly participation forecast. The team set an a priori goal to generate predictions within 10% of actual participant counts.

The study team provided a dataset without predictors, as well as multiple candidate sets of predictors to the MLflow package and compared predictive accuracy across the resulting models using the Symmetric Mean Absolute Percentage Error (sMAPE) as a comparison metric. The sMAPE compares observed values with forecasted values; smaller values indicate better fit (Kreinovich et al., 2014). The study team also prioritized models that yielded overpredictions over models yielding underpredictions; this approach ensures budget estimates sufficient to serve all eligible participants.

Stage 2: Project WIC costs

After choosing the model, the study team applied the forecasts to a funding formula to estimate WIC food and NSA costs and then summed the estimates to predict the total WIC funds needed for FY 2027. The study team produced estimates based on forecasted WIC participation, using the point estimate as well as the lower and upper bounds of the 95% confidence interval.

Model results and projected WIC funding needs

Stage 1: Forecast WIC participation

Almost all MLflow-selected models across different predictor sets were types of the Prophet time series model (Satrio et al., 2021), which accounts for programmatic trends, seasonality, and holiday effects. WIC participation shows a seasonal pattern, which may account for the favorable performance of this model.

The Prophet model was developed by Meta (formerly Facebook) and is now available as an open source package in Python and R.

The elastic net regularization procedure selected the following variables:

- Total births, lagged by 3 and 6 months
- Number of births to women enrolled in WIC in the current month, as well as 1- and 6-month lags
- SNAP participation
- Gross domestic product
- Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index

The solution recommended by the elastic net procedure did not include Medicaid. However, the study team opted to include Medicaid participation because of its direct effect on WIC eligibility. With the passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (also known as H.R. 1, 2026), the study team also anticipates potentially large changes to Medicaid enrollment (Bleich & Plata-Nino, 2026). A reduction in Medicaid participation could both **decrease the population eligible for WIC** (i.e., by reducing the number of individuals who meet WIC income eligibility criteria only because they participate in Medicaid and are adjunctively income eligible) and **increase the demand for WIC** among those who remain income eligible for WIC but lose Medicaid benefits. Although it is not clear how much H.R.1 will reduce Medicaid participation among potential WIC participants, the study team wanted the model to account for this information in the future.

The final model predictors also excluded immigration. The study team examined a model that added immigration; this model looked similar to the selected model but had a higher SMAPE, indicating a worse fit. The study team concluded that the association between immigration and WIC participation had such small effects that this variable could be removed.

Despite attempts to address overfitting by reducing the number of predictors, the study team remained concerned that the model with predictors was overfit to the test period data. Beginning in October 2025, WIC participation dropped at the same time as the federal government shutdown. Based on publicly available administrative data, WIC participation has not rebounded as of February 2026 (FNA, 2026b). The model with predictors produced forecast values for the test period that anticipate this large drop, possibly in part because SNAP participation also dropped during the shutdown. This raised substantial concerns about potential overfitting, which could reduce the accuracy of forecasts for FY 2027. As a result, the study team advanced a model that did not include predictors to the testing phase. **Appendix C** describes how the model with additional predictors performed.

Model performance: Testing data

The study team examined how well the model predicted WIC participation in the testing period (February 2025–January 2026). For this full year, the model forecasted WIC participation at 0.65% above the actual observed values (95% confidence interval: -2.16%, 3.47%; SMAPE = 0.014). As **Figure 1** displays, the model varied in whether it over- or underpredicted participation in a given month (see **Appendix B** for monthly predictions). For example, in February 2025, the actual value (green triangle) is about 0.5% higher than the forecasted value (orange circle); in August, the actual value is 0.1% below the forecasted value.

Figure 1. Observed and predicted monthly WIC participation, October 2020–January 2026

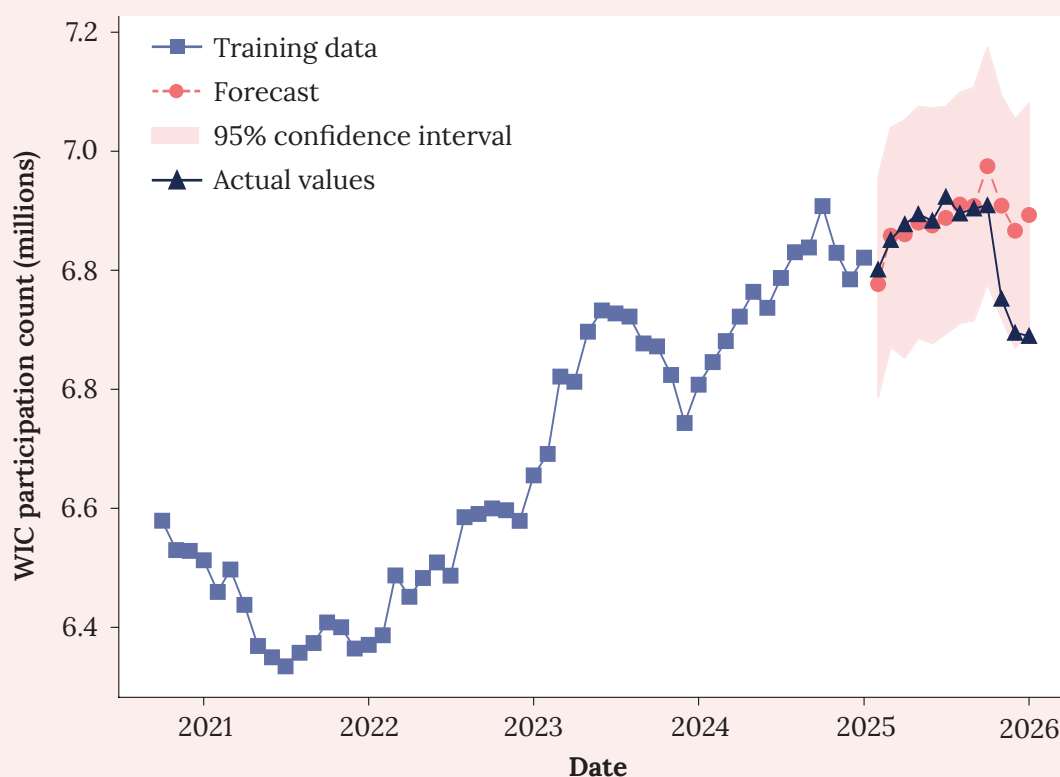
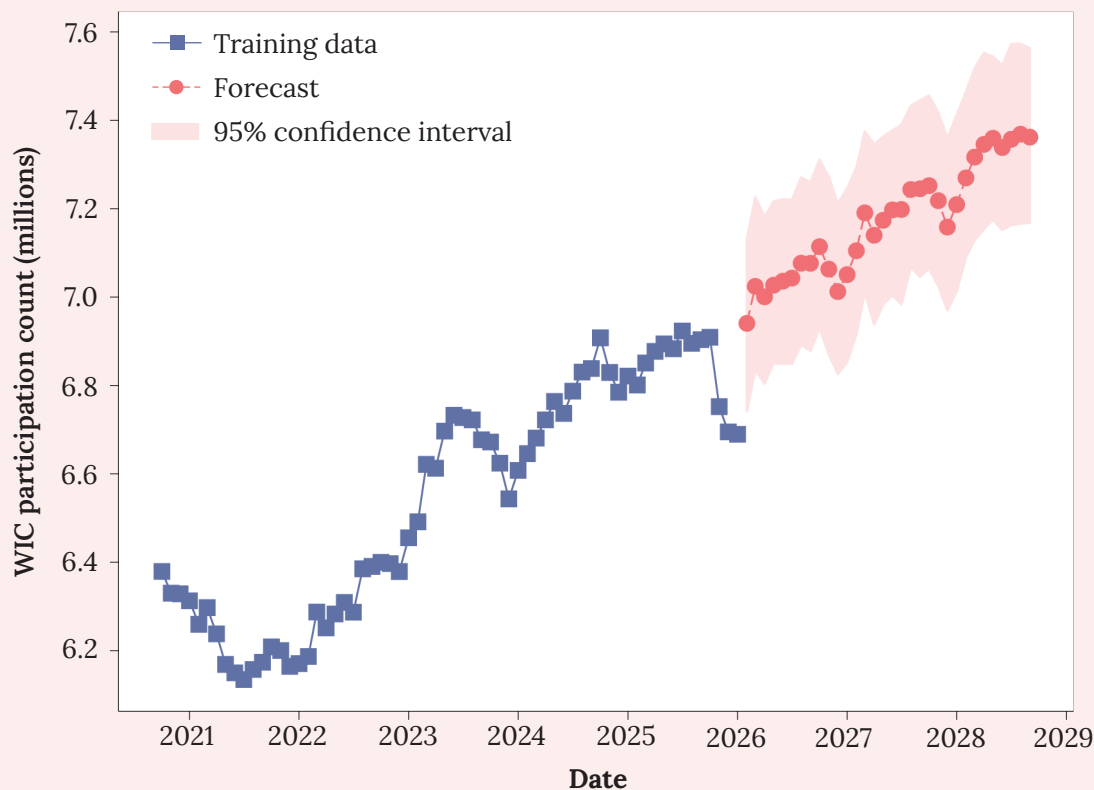


Figure 2. Observed and forecasted WIC participation, FY 2021–FY 2027



Note. FY = fiscal year

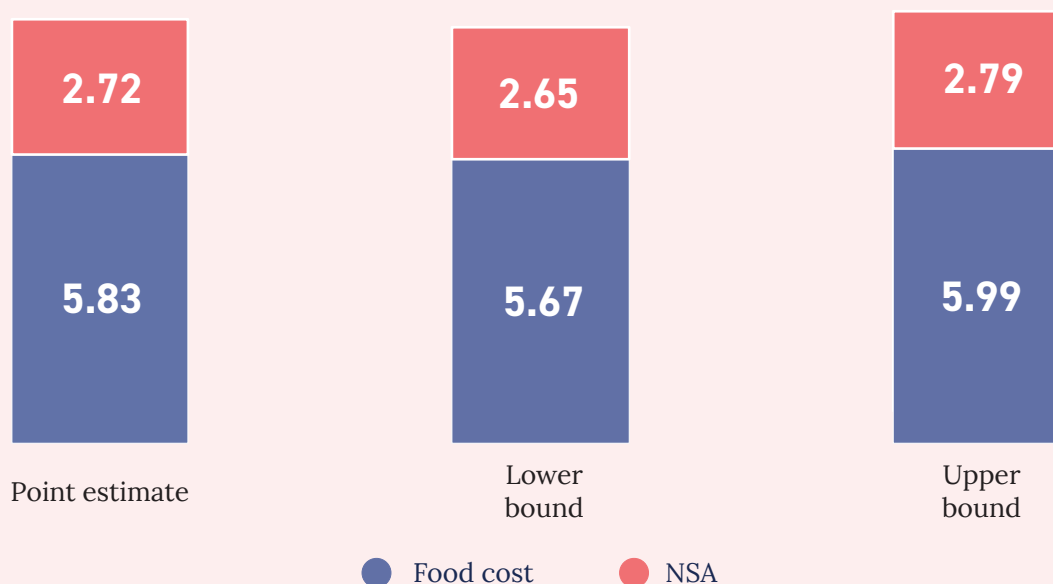
Stage 2: Project WIC funding needs

Using the forecasted WIC participation for FY 2027, the study team projected food and NSA costs. The team adjusted NSA costs to match the values assumed in the President's proposed budget for FY 2027 (OMB, 2026). Specifically, the President's budget estimates the NSA costs as \$31.73 per participant for FY 2027.⁴ For food costs, the study team assumed the same average cost per participant in FY 2025 but adjusted for inflation (estimated at 2.7% in FY 2026 and 2.3% in FY 2027; Congressional Budget Office, 2026b). The study team also estimated costs based on the lower and upper bounds of the 95% confidence interval for WIC participation.

A total of \$8.55 billion is required to fully fund WIC for FY 2027 based on forecasted participation. This includes \$5.83 billion in food costs and \$2.72 billion for NSA. The 95% confidence interval ranges from \$8.32 billion to \$8.78 billion, providing the likely bounds about the expected funds needed for WIC (see **Figure 3**). **Table 2** estimates how this budget would be distributed by WIC participant categories.

⁴ Before the release of the President's budget for FY 2027, the study team intended to assume the same per-participant NSA costs as observed for FY 2025 (the last year for which all months are observed) and adjust for inflation. The study team recommends this approach for future projections made in the absence of federal government estimates.

Figure 3. Projected WIC funding needs (billions of U.S. dollars), FY 2027



Note. FY = fiscal year; NSA = Nutrition Services and Administration

Table 2. Projected costs by WIC participant category, FY 2027

Participant category	FY 2027 costs (billions of U.S. dollars)		
	Estimate	Lower bound	Upper bound
All participants	\$8.55	\$8.32	\$8.78
Women	\$1.20	\$1.17	\$1.24
Infants	\$4.64	\$4.51	\$4.76
Children	\$2.71	\$2.63	\$2.78

Note. Projected costs are rounded to the nearest ten million. The share of the budget attributed to participant categories is estimated based on average food package costs and expected number of participants falling into each category.
FY = fiscal year

Testing funding scenarios

Using the projections of WIC funding needs of \$8.55 billion for FY 2027, the study team next considered the implications of this estimate for the allocations proposed in the President's Budget Request (OMB, 2026) and the House of Representatives' proposal (Committee on Appropriations, 2026). Both proposals set a total funding cap of \$8 billion but allocate those funds differently. Both proposals also suggest variations of reductions to the CVB. The study team estimated the effect of limiting funding to the two proposed budgets without a change to the CVB (scenarios 1 and 3, with scenario 1 using the President's budget cap and scenario 3 using the House's) and with a change to the CVB (scenarios 2 and 4 representing the President's and the House's proposal, respectively).

SCENARIO 1

Funding limited to President's budget proposal (no change to the CVB or other benefits)

The President's budget for FY 2027 requests \$8 billion for WIC, with \$500 million reserved for contingency funding. With an operating budget of \$7.5 billion, the proposed budget represents about a \$1.05 billion shortfall (95% confidence interval: \$820 million, \$1.28 billion) for the program. Assuming no changes to program benefits provided to participants, the shortfall would translate to more than 876,000 eligible women, infants, and children (876,706; 95% confidence interval: 682,747; 1,070,799) being turned away from the program each month.

In addition to limiting the number of individuals served, this situation would lead to administrative challenges for the State and local agencies administering the program. WIC programs would potentially need to start and maintain a waitlist.

SCENARIO 2

Funding limited to President's budget plus a reduction in CVB to \$10/\$13 (no change to other benefits)

The President's budget also suggests a reduction in the CVB, lowering the value from \$26 to \$10 for children, \$52 to \$13 for breastfeeding women, and \$47 to \$13 for pregnant and postpartum women.⁵ Although this benefit change would lower average per-participant food costs, it might

⁵ The President's budget proposal does not discuss the infant CVB substitution option. The projections assume that some State agencies allow for up to a \$4 substitution of infant fruits and vegetables for CVB.

also lower the likelihood of someone choosing to participate in WIC. Studies repeatedly suggest the CVB is a highly valued component of WIC. In fact, in a survey of WIC participants across 12 WIC State agencies, Ritchie et al. (2022) found that 14% of participants reported being very or somewhat unlikely to continue with WIC if the CVB was lowered. Changing the CVB amount might also influence the redemption rate, directly affecting the amount of dollars spent by participants. Gleason et al. (2021) report a CVB redemption rate of 74.3%; this finding is based on 2018 redemption information, when CVB amounts were similar to the proposed values. However, participants are currently receiving a CVB with a value up to four times higher. As such, participants might spend closer to 100% of the proposed values in an effort to obtain the highest value of fruits and vegetables. For example, a family with one child participating in WIC today would receive \$26 in CVB and would be expected to spend just over \$19 on fruits and vegetables. This value exceeds the proposed CVB of \$10. If the reduction was enacted, the family might change their spending patterns to redeem the full \$10 to try to maintain the child's diet as much as possible.

Table 3 demonstrates that lowering the CVB keeps the total funding requirement within the \$7.5 billion operating budget proposed by the White House if the CVB reduction does not change redemption behaviors or if the reduction also results in lower participation (see final column). However, if there is no change in WIC participation, the \$7.5 billion budget is still too low (by \$94 million, with a total projected budget need of \$7.594 billion) to serve all likely participants if they spend all the CVB. More precisely, if there is no change in WIC participation, the President's budget proposal would be insufficient if participants increased their spending of the CVB to 89%, representing less than \$9 for children and about \$11.57 for women for fruits and vegetables. Two additional potential outcomes of this adjustment should be considered:

- Projections suggest that reductions to the CVB could lead to nearly 1 million eligible individuals electing not to participate in WIC, losing vital nutritional support during critical periods of development.
- Reductions to the CVB also equate to lost revenue for WIC-authorized vendors. According to the conditions explored by the project team, grocery stores and producers could lose between \$955 million (assuming no change in eligible individuals' likelihoods of participating and increased CVB redemption to reduce the impact of the lower CVB) and \$1.23 billion (assuming decreased participation and no change in CVB redemption) in FY 2027 for CVB alone, not counting additional dollars for other WIC food benefits lost because of lower participation.

Table 3. Projections of the effects of reducing the WIC CVB according to the President’s budget proposal, FY 2027

Condition	Forecasted monthly participation	Projected total food cost (billions)	Projected total NSA costs (billions)	Projected total budget needs (billions)	Budget Shortfall (billions)
No change in likelihood of participating in WIC; no change in CVB redemption	7,144,526	\$4.677	\$2.720	\$7.397	None
No change in likelihood of participating; CVB redemption increases to 100%	7,144,526	\$4.873	\$2.720	\$7.594	\$0.094
Decrease in WIC participation; no change in CVB redemption	6,144,293	\$4.597	\$2.340	\$6.936	None
Decrease in WIC participation, CVB redemption increases to 100%	6,144,293	\$4.766	\$2.340	\$7.106	None

Note. Projected costs are rounded to the nearest million. WIC participation forecasts are based on past WIC participation. Projected food costs assume the FY 2025 costs and account for inflation projected by the Congressional Budget Office (2026b). Projected NSA costs use the per-participant costs assumed in the President’s budget proposal for FY 2027 (OMB, 2026). CVB = cash-value benefit; FY = fiscal year; NSA = Nutrition Services and Administration

SCENARIO 3

Funding limited to House of Representatives’ proposal (no change to the CVB or other benefits)

The House of Representatives’ proposal (Committee on Appropriations, 2026) sets a total funding cap of \$8 billion, with no explicit carveout for contingency funds. Assuming all funds would be used to serve participants, this proposal still represents about a \$549,000 funding shortfall for the program assuming all benefits are maintained at the current levels. Only 94% of individuals who would be likely to participate in WIC could be served under this proposal, requiring WIC to turn more than 450,000 potential participants away each month (458,851; confidence interval: 264,893; 652,945).

SCENARIO 4

Funding limited to House of Representatives' proposal plus a reduction in CVB (no change to other benefits)

Beyond setting the budget to \$8 billion, the House's proposal limits the CVB "for women and children participants that is set at an amount equal to 267% of the amount provided for such voucher in FY 2020 for children participants, and 428% of the amount provided for such voucher in such fiscal year for women participants." (Committee on Appropriations, 2026, pp. 60–61) In FY 2020, the CVB allowance was \$9 for children and \$11 for women; applying the formula described in the budget proposal equals a CVB allowance of \$24 for children and \$47 for women.⁶ **Table 4** summarizes the projected effects of reducing the CVB in accordance with the House's budget proposal. Among the four conditions presented, the only condition where the House's proposed budget allows all potential WIC participants to enroll in the program would be if WIC participants are less likely to enroll in WIC, resulting in fewer participants (assuming the 14% reduction reported in Ritchie et al., 2022), and participants do not increase the share of CVB used each month.

Table 4. Projections of the effects of reducing the WIC CVB according to the House of Representative's budget proposal, FY 2027

Condition	Forecasted monthly participation	Projected total food cost (billions)	Projected total NSA costs (billions)	Projected total budget needs (billions)	Budget Shortfall (billions)
No change in likelihood of participating in WIC; no change in CVB redemption	7,144,526	\$5.660	\$2.720	\$8.380	\$0.380
No change in likelihood of participating; CVB redemption increases to 100%	7,144,526	\$6.197	\$2.720	\$8.917	\$0.917
Decrease in WIC participation; no change in CVB redemption	6,144,293	\$5.443	\$2.340	\$7.782	None
Decrease in WIC participation, CVB redemption increases to 100%	6,144,293	\$5.904	\$2.340	\$8.244	\$0.244

Note. Projected costs are rounded to the nearest million. WIC participation forecasts are based on past WIC participation. Projected food costs assume the FY 2025 costs and account for inflation projected by the Congressional Budget Office (2026b). Projected NSA costs use the per-participant costs assumed in the President's budget proposal for FY 2027 (OMB, 2026).

CVB = cash-value benefit; FY = fiscal year; NSA = Nutrition Services and Administration

⁶ The calculations also assume that some State agencies allow for up to a \$4 substitution of infant fruits and vegetables for CVB.

Limitations

The study team recognizes several project limitations. The study period includes several events that may uniquely influence WIC participation:

- **Shifts in program benefits and delivery in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.** During the pandemic, WIC benefits and service delivery changed drastically. State agencies had a variety of waivers available to them to help mitigate the need to physically close or limit operations, leading to many temporary changes in how the program was delivered.
- **Medicaid unwinding.** The COVID-19 pandemic also influenced participation in other safety net programs that confer adjunctive income eligibility for WIC. To receive funding, states were required to continually enroll all Medicaid participants (i.e., individuals enrolled in Medicaid could not be removed even if their eligibility status had changed). In April 2023, the continuous enrollment condition began to unwind, leading to a steady decline in Medicaid participation in subsequent months. Fewer individuals remained eligible for WIC and others had to provide additional documentation of income as a direct consequence of losing eligibility for Medicaid (Kessler et al., 2025).
- **Infant formula shortage.** The national recall of certain Abbott infant formula products in February 2022 led to an infant formula shortage that persisted into 2023. This shortage affected the availability of formula for the entire U.S. population, including WIC participants. Because many formulas were not available during these months, the shortage may have influenced parents' decisions about enrolling in WIC. WIC played an important role in supporting the increased interest in breastfeeding during this time.
- **October 2025 federal government shutdown.** Following Congress's failure to pass appropriations legislation for FY 2026, federal government services, including WIC, shut down from October 1 through November 12. Although WIC continued to operate as normal in most parts of the country, some areas experienced disruptions in service availability at the local level, and WIC staff were operating with significant uncertainty about continued funding availability. Ultimately, two emergency funding infusions were required to continue program operations. WIC participation patterns in October through the end of the year indicate a sharp decline in participation during and in the months following the shutdown.

As highlighted earlier in the report, WIC has experienced a decline in participation beginning in October 2025. Although the study team acknowledges that this drop was the immediate result of the federal government shutdown, WIC may also be seeing the initial effects of changes to SNAP and Medicaid participation because of H.R. 1.⁷ It is too early to know whether reduction in

⁷ See <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-tracker-people-are-losing-food-assistance-as-the-republican-megabill> for evidence of how H. R. 1 appears to be influencing SNAP participation.

the SNAP and Medicaid caseloads will result in a decline (because of reduction in WIC adjunctive income eligibility) or an increase (because fewer benefits could increase eligible individuals' willingness to participate in WIC) in program participation. The current model is trained on data prior to the decline. Even though the study team used October 2025–January 2026 data to forecast participation for FY 2027, the model still assumes a general increasing trend. It is impossible to know whether WIC participation will continue to decline or experience a rebound. This change at the end of the study period challenges the assumptions inherent in the modeling and should be accounted for in future iterations of the model.

Recommendations for future modeling

Regular data updates will benefit the model and allow the calculations to account for the most recent trends.

The model developed through this project accurately predicted WIC participation within 1% of real funding needs. These predictions help estimate total WIC funding using straightforward models. The tool offers essential data for program advocacy and future planning.

The study team created a convenient “plug-and-play” version of the model that eliminates the need for statistical programming. By using an app connected to Python, the tool enables users to easily forecast WIC participation and automatically project funding needs through a user-friendly interface. The current version of the tool incorporates all the data used to produce the FY 2027 estimates.

The study team recommends regularly updating the months of data included in the model to refine the estimates. All prediction models include bias and uncertainty. This uncertainty is somewhat elevated by the WIC participation trends observed in the first quarter of FY 2026, starting with October 2025. Most of the training data cover a period of WIC participation growth, and the model does not fully respond to the drop observed in the months following the federal government shutdown. The additional months of data will reveal whether the decline that started in October 2025 represents a temporary shock or a new trend in participation. In the past, federal government shutdowns have been disruptive to individual families (Carlson, Neuberger, & Rosenbaum, 2017) but had minimal and temporary effects on overall WIC participation. As such, the study team assumes the current downward trend will be temporary.

Future enhancements

Beyond the data updates, the forecasting tool can be adjusted to examine additional funding scenarios. Potential use cases include the following:

- Changes in Medicaid and SNAP policy (e.g., H.R. 1) that affect eligibility for and participation in those programs can be explored as a use case. As described earlier, reducing the population that participates in Medicaid and SNAP could directly reduce the number of individuals eligible for WIC because of a decrease in the number of individuals who are only adjunctively income eligible for WIC. Yet there may also be individuals who are income eligible for WIC but do not participate in the program because they feel they receive sufficient support through Medicaid or SNAP. If those individuals lose Medicaid or SNAP benefits, they may be more likely to engage with WIC, leading to greater program demand. Any analysis of the impact of Medicaid and SNAP eligibility changes should incorporate the likelihood of lost eligibility but higher rates of participation for at least some eligible individuals.
- The tool may also help evaluate the effect of proposed changes to the WIC food package. This report provides a test case of examining the effect of lowering the CVB. Changes to milk issuance or changes in infant formula rebates to State agencies may also influence the cost of the program. The tool can help explore how these changes would affect the food budget.

The model was selected, in part, to reduce the number of data sources used to make an accurate prediction. The goal was to reduce data collection efforts in the future while still providing strong predictions. The study team ultimately selected a model without covariates because of overfitting. There may be alternative specifications that provide a strong model that includes additional predictors; the team recommends exploring these options. To minimize data collection in the future, web crawling technology designed to identify and automatically collect new data points for critical predictors could help maintain an up-to-date model, although this would require significant resources to develop the technology.

The decline in WIC participation starting in the first quarter of FY 2026 provides a unique challenge to the forecasting. The study team considered adding an indicator variable to the model that would account for the federal government shutdown, the hypothesized reason for the sudden decline. However, the testing period did not include any months with the federal government shutdown, so this variable would not provide any additional information. A future revision of the model could incorporate a shutdown variable. The importance of accounting for this change will depend on whether WIC participation trends revert to a general increase or if the shutdown initiated a general decline in WIC participation.

The model currently uses national information, yet WIC is operated by State agencies. State agencies implement the program in various ways and select different policy options. For example, not all State agencies allow the same set of whole grains or all forms (e.g., frozen, canned, dried) of fruits and vegetables. They can also allow different state-level programs to confer automatic

income eligibility. These state-specific policies all influence the likelihood that someone participates in WIC. States also experience different economic and social conditions. Using State agency-level information could improve the overall national forecasts by accounting for differential trends across the country. This may become critical following H.R. 1. Beyond improving the national forecasting, it would also allow the National WIC Association (NWA) and partners to predict State agency-specific funding needs for the geographic states, U.S. territories, and Indigenous agencies that administer WIC. NWA could also evaluate the potential effects of specific policies that might spread beyond a single agency.

Recommendations and implications for policy

As discussed earlier, WIC funding is provided annually through congressional appropriations. Congress relies on accurate projections of funding needs to determine funding levels. This new forecasting model will allow NWA to inform congressional deliberations for FY 2027 and future fiscal years by estimating needs and assessing the impact of specific proposals.

NWA will also use this model to track the impact of state-level changes to SNAP and Medicaid as a result of H.R. 1. The study team anticipates that as individuals lose SNAP and Medicaid eligibility, they will face additional barriers to WIC access because they would no longer be adjunctively eligible. At the same time, those individuals may be more likely to apply for WIC to meet their needs as they lose access to SNAP or Medicaid support.

For FY 2027, **NWA recommends that Congress provide at least \$8.55 billion in new budget authority for WIC** to ensure that all eligible individuals interested in participating can access the program. It is also critical that USDA retain robust carryover funds in the program year over year, because State agencies may carry over certain funds. NWA warns that overall WIC funding at the House proposed level of \$8 billion would result in more than 450,000 women, infants, and children potentially losing access to the program each month, assuming no other changes are made to the program; nearly double this number would lose benefits under the President's proposal. Cuts to WIC's fruit and vegetable benefit may also result in loss of benefits for families who may choose to forgo participation. **The study team estimates that more than 1 million women, infants, and children may lose WIC benefits because of the President's proposed cuts to fruits and vegetables.** Although the House proposal includes a more modest fruit and vegetable cut, Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Andy Harris (MD-01) has indicated that this would just be one step towards the President's proposal to return benefits to \$10-\$13 per month.

In the long-term, NWA also recommends that Congress continue to explore alternative funding models for WIC, such as mandatory funding. In the months during and immediately following the 2025 federal government shutdown, a significant drop in WIC participation was observed, likely due at least in part to the uncertainty of funding availability for the program. Shifting WIC to a mandatory program with funds flowing directly from the U.S. Treasury—without the need for congressional appropriations—would prevent such disruptions.

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Appendix A. Correlation of WIC participation predictors

Table A.1. Correlation of WIC participation predictors, October 2020–January 2026

Variable	WIC participation	Births: total	Births: WIC mothers	SNAP	Medicaid	Unemployment rate	GDP	CPI	PCEPI
WIC participation	1.00	-0.01	0.34	0.11	-0.33	-0.34	0.89	0.89	0.89
Births: total	-0.01	1.00	0.80	-0.10	0.04	-0.16	0.04	0.04	0.04
Births: WIC mothers	0.34	0.80	1.00	0.05	-0.08	-0.21	0.27	0.28	0.27
SNAP	0.11	-0.10	0.05	1.00	0.10	-0.02	-0.07	-0.03	-0.04
Medicaid	-0.33	0.04	-0.08	0.10	1.00	-0.57	-0.20	-0.12	-0.14
Unemployment rate	-0.34	-0.16	-0.21	-0.02	1.00	1.00	-0.58	-0.64	-0.62
GDP	0.89	0.04	0.27	-0.07	-0.20	-0.58	1.00	0.99	0.99
CPI	0.89	0.04	0.28	-0.03	-0.12	-0.64	0.99	1.00	1.00
PCEPI	0.89	0.04	0.27	-0.04	-0.14	-0.62	0.99	1.00	1.00

Note. CPI = Consumer Price Index; GDP = gross domestic product; PCEPI = Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index; SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Appendix B. Testing data

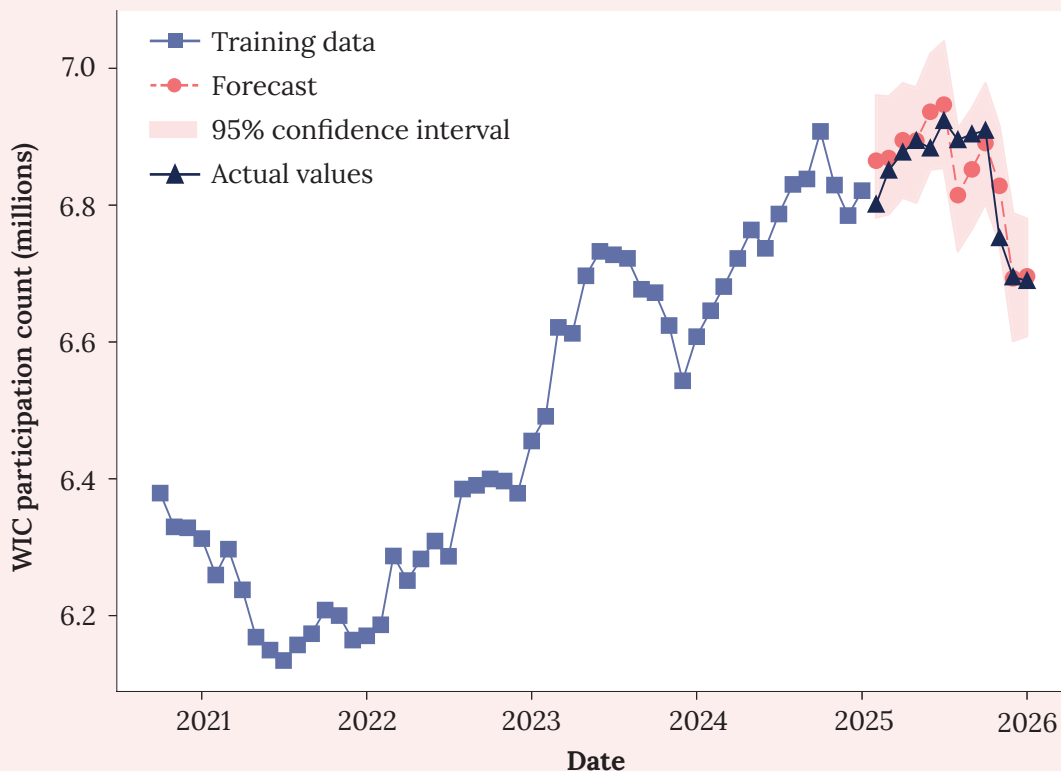
Table B.1. Observed and forecasted WIC participation counts, February 2025–January 2026 (testing period)

Month	Observed participation (N)	Forecasted participation (N)	Difference	Percent difference
February 2025	6,801,092	6,776,743	24,349	-0.36
March 2025	6,850,834	6,857,983	-7,149	0.10
April 2025	6,877,211	6,860,393	16,818	-0.24
May 2025	6,894,185	6,880,013	14,172	-0.21
June 2025	6,883,193	6,875,181	8,012	-0.12
July 2025	6,923,316	6,887,911	35,405	-0.51
August 2025	6,895,316	6,910,392	-15,076	0.22
September 2025	6,903,718	6,908,005	-4,287	0.06
October 2025	6,909,050	6,974,834	-65,784	0.95
November 2025	6,752,128	6,908,464	-156,336	2.32
December 2025	6,694,838	6,866,394	-171,556	2.56
January 2026	6,689,525	6,892,879	-203,354	3.04

Appendix C. Prophet model with additional predictors

The study team explored using a model with all covariates selected by the elastic net regularization procedure (total births lagged by 3- and 6 -months, births to women enrolled in WIC in the current month, 1- and 6-month lagged births to women enrolled in WIC, SNAP participation, gross domestic product, and the Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index) and adding Medicaid participation. Figure C.1 illustrates the forecasted and actual values in the test data period, with the forecasted values closely mirroring the actual values. The study team was concerned by the close estimations observed in November 2025 through January 2026 because this drop was likely the result of the external shock of the federal government shutdown. The study team concluded the model was overfit to the test data. SNAP also experienced a sharp decline during the shutdown; however, removing this variable did not alleviate overfitting concerns.

Figure C.1. Observed and predicted monthly WIC participation using covariates, October 2020–January 2026



The study team also identified some challenges with missing data following the test period. Medicaid data were only available through June 2025, and several predictors were missing data for October 2025 because of the federal government shutdown. Because these missing values occurred at the end of the study period, they were not part of model development and testing. However, the data points would be used to forecast FY 2027 participation. Forecasted participation could include greater error than expected if the missing values reflect trends different from those in the observed data, even if the data were imputed using known values. Although this limitation does not preclude future modeling using additional predictors, it suggests caution in interpreting results using models that include unknown values.