



NWA 2022 RESEARCH PRIORITIES EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NWA'S MISSION

The National WIC Association (NWA) provides its members with tools and leadership to expand and sustain effective nutrition services for mothers and young children

PURPOSE

NWA views the cycle of research, practice, and policy to be reciprocal and encourages collaboration between researchers and practitioners to conduct high quality research that supports WIC and identifies innovative approaches to program improvement. The goal of the NWA Research Priorities is to identify research areas that support NWA and WIC programs nationwide. We aim to be responsive to emerging issues and continue to explore, demonstrate and integrate evidence-based practices that improve the health and well-being of WIC families. Researchers should use this document to guide the development of their research questions and design. A variety of research methods and designs from the social, nutritional and health sciences can be employed to understand various outcomes associated with WIC participation and to better understand the WIC participant experience. NWA encourages researchers to apply an equity lens to their work across all research questions and topic areas. We identify equity considerations for each area of identified research.

RESEARCH PRIORITIES

Breastfeeding Initiation, Duration, and Exclusivity of WIC Participants

More research is needed on WIC participants' experience with breastfeeding and identifying how WIC policies and breastfeeding education and support can close the gap between WIC participants and non-participants. Research across breastfeeding initiation, duration, and exclusivity are needed to understand the full spectrum of breastfeeding behaviors and benefits.

Health Outcomes Associated with WIC Participation

During and beyond years of participation WIC influences health outcomes across life stages, including pregnancy, infancy, early childhood, the inter-pregnancy and post-partum period. Further, WIC participation in early childhood may benefit children at later life stages. While research in all of these life stages is helpful, there is a dearth of evidence around WIC's effects in maternal health and early and late childhood health.

WIC Staff Recruitment, Retention, and Impact on Participant Experience

WIC participants interact with a variety of staff at WIC clinics and relationships with these staff members are central to the participant experience, yet little research explores how WIC staff impact participant experience. There is also dearth of data on the WIC workforce and how diverse WIC staff can be recruited and retained.

Impact of COVID-19 on WIC Participant Experience and Outcomes

States received several federal waivers to adapt program delivery during COVID-19, such as allowing

virtual enrollment and re-certification. Waivers also allowed flexible options for obtaining food benefits and nutrition education, counseling and referrals.¹ It is important to consider the impact that innovations have had on WIC service delivery and participants satisfaction throughout the pandemic, while also considering if the sudden shift in how WIC services were being delivered was a catalyst for new systems level innovations to be established. Research should build upon NWA's Multi-State WIC Participant Satisfaction Survey, which explored WIC participants experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.²

Dietary and Behavioral Changes Associated with Increase to Cash Value Benefit for Fruits and Vegetables (CVB)

The WIC CVB was increased from \$9-11 per month to \$35 per month as part of the American Rescue Plan Act, before being extended in October 2021 through the fiscal year 2022 appropriations process. Appropriators adjusted the CVB to \$24 per month for children, \$43-\$47 per month for pregnant and postpartum participants.³ In March 2022, NWA, in partnership with researchers from the Nutrition Policy Institute (NPI), released a report that found an increase in child fruit and vegetable consumption among WIC participants after the benefit was enhanced in summer 2021. The report analyzed over 10,000 responses from WIC participants across 5 State WIC Agencies.³ Further should assess the impact of a CVB increase over a longer period of time, as well as how the CVB bump impacted variety of fruit and vegetables consumption.





WIC Participants Use of Technology and Barriers to Technology Access

Optimizing WIC service delivery requires a thorough understanding of the current skills, needs, experiences, and desires of the families served by the program. Research in this area should build upon NWA's Multi-State WIC Participant Satisfaction Survey, which explored participants' perceptions on technology use in WIC, such as the WIC shopper app.¹ NWA also co-convenes the WIC Technology Resource Group and has a variety of resources available on the WIC Hub.⁴ Quantitative and qualitative studies should explore WIC participants' comfort with existing WIC technology, as well as interest and ideas for new technologies. Research should also assess WIC participants' use of online shopping platforms and digital literacy levels among participants.

Economic Value of WIC Participation

Research is needed to explore and demonstrate the economic value and impact of WIC investments, particularly related to Medicaid. Recent research by UCLA, PHFE WIC, and the City of Los Angeles determined that every dollar invested in WIC returns an average of \$2.48 in medical, educational, and productivity costs.⁵ However, the study's model was limited to cost savings associated with preterm birth. Cost-savings related to children's health, such as childhood obesity prevention and increased food security would be particularly valuable. Further, longitudinal studies should be assess longer-term outcomes i.e., following children over a longer period than the 5 years of WIC eligibility.

Systems Level Innovations and Cross Program Collaboration in WIC

Systems level innovations enable WIC programs to leverage other programs and services that support the population WIC serves. Policies and procedures that support system level innovation can enhance WIC program capacity to ensure families are receiving the support they need to access a range of services that promote health and wellbeing. Research related to automated referrals from healthcare providers, along with data sharing with Medicaid and SNAP, are needed. Implementation science frameworks are particularly relevant for this research area.

Food Package Redemption Patterns and Impact of Potential Changes to WIC Food Packages

The food package is one of the key benefits of WIC and aims to ensure that participants get the foods they need for their specific lifestage. Research around the redemption of food package categories, as well as exploring the impact of potential food package changes, is critical to ensure that participants are benefitting from a nutrient dense, culturally relevant food package that they will enjoy redeeming and consuming. Further, many participants do not redeem the full value of their food package. Research is needed from both the health behavior perspective and epidemiology perspective to better understand these patterns.

Changes to WIC Caseload

According to the latest data from USDA Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), in 2019, WIC served an estimates 57.4% of eligible participants.⁶ Research is needed to understand the patterns in participation among different groups of eligible populations: those who are eligible but never enrolled, those who enrolled but stopped participating in the program before their eligibility expired, and those who enrolled and remained enrolled throughout their eligibility period. Research is particularly needed with populations eligible but not enrolled in the program to identify barriers to enrollment. Researchers should refer to the FNS WIC Eligibility and Coverage Rates report to understand national and state level trends around coverage rates of different demographic groups.

Further Questions? NWA is available as a resource to researchers interested in WIC; for questions or further information, please email NWA's Senior Manager of Research and Program Innovation, Christina Chauvenet, at cchauvenet@nwica.org.

1 Bush, Alexander & Lee, Hunjin (2021). Changes in USDA Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A First Look at the Impact of Federal Waivers. Prepared by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Alexandria, VA. www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.

2 Ritchie L, Lee D, Sallack L, Machel G., Chauvenet C, Kim L, Song L, Whaley S (2021) Multi-State WIC Participant Satisfaction Survey: Learning from Program Adaptations during COVID. <https://thewichub.org/multi-state-wic-participant-satisfaction-survey-learning-from-program-adaptations-during-covid/>

3 Ritchie L, Lee D, Felix C, Sallack L, Chauvenet C, Machel G, Whaley SE. Multi-State WIC Participant Survey: Cash Value Benefit Increase During COVID. March 2022. <https://thewichub.org/multi-state-wic-participant-satisfaction-survey-cash-value-benefit-increasing-during-covid/>

4 Power Your Mission: Human-Centered Technology and WIC. <https://thewichub.org/learn-about-the-newly-formed-wic-technology-resource-group/>

5 Nianogo RA, Wang MC, Basurto-Davila R, Nobari TZ, Preli M, Arah OA, Whaley SE. Economic evaluation of California prenatal participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) to prevent preterm birth. *Prev Med*. 2019 Jul;124:42-49. doi: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2019.04.011. Epub 2019 Apr 16. PMID: 30998955; PMCID: PMC6696990.

6 Farson Gray, K., Balch-Crystal, E., Giannarelli, L., & Johnson, P. (2022). National- and State-level estimates of WIC eligibility and WIC program reach in 2019. U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service.. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/national-state-level-estimates-eligibility-program-reach-2019>