

Research Brief: WIC Participants' Perceptions of the Cash-Value Benefit Increase During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Problem Statement

Between 2020 and 2022, the part of the WIC benefit known as the Cash-Value Benefit or CVB, which provides money to spend on fruits and vegetables, increased considerably as part of the American Rescue Plan Act. CVB benefit levels increased from pre-pandemic levels of \$9/month for children and \$11/month for adults, to \$35/month for both women and children during the summer of 2021, before being adjusted in October to \$24/month for children, \$43/month for pregnant and postpartum women, and \$47/month for breastfeeding women.

We sought to understand if increases in the CVB benefit resulted in changes in WIC participants' fruit and vegetable intake, as well as overall perceptions of the benefit.

Method

- Semi-structured interviews
- 51 WIC participants in Wilmington, DE
- Focus on purchasing and consumption of fruits and vegetables, as well as their perceptions of the benefit.
- Data collected in Spring 2022 via phone.
- Recruitment occurred in supermarkets and community sites.

More WIC CVB Funding Resulted in Greater:



Purchasing of Fruits and Vegetables



Consumption of Fruits and Vegetables



Variety of Fruits and Vegetables



Participant perceptions of the value of WIC



Themes

WIC Participant Feedback

Increased Purchasing of Fruits and Vegetables

"Before the pandemic, the fruit and vegetables, it wasn't as significant, I think, as it is now, like before it wasn't as much money. So, I could probably get maybe a few bananas or whatever like that, but now I can get like a lot of fruit and a lot of vegetables, and it's like really significant. \$50 goes a long way for fresh fruit."

Increased Consumption of Fruits and Vegetables

"I guess we make healthier choices, since we have so much extra to spend on fruits and vegetables and I can make a lot more things from like scratch."

Enhanced Dietary Variety

"Yeah, just give, you know, different variety. And like I said, I tried different fruit, you know, different things. So, it did help a lot with, you know, the little bit extra."

High Participant Valuation of Benefit Increase

"They increased the amount of fruits and vegetables, I think before I was only getting like \$11 and now it's \$24, so that's, that helped a lot. I really like that."

Findings from this study demonstrate that WIC participants strongly support the CVB benefit increase that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that higher CVB levels increased participants' reported purchasing and consumption of fruit and vegetables as well as their dietary variety. Our findings also suggest that while participants appreciated the higher CVB benefit amount during the COVID-19 pandemic, many believe that it is still insufficient.

Permanently extending the CVB increase may promote health equity by increasing low-income children and families' access to nutritious, affordable food.



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