

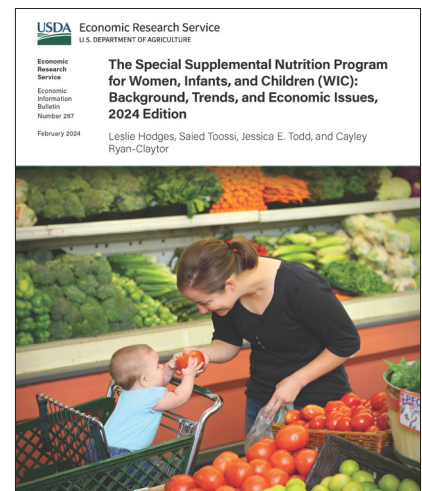


# The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC): Background, Trends, and Economic Issues, 2024 Edition

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## What Is the Issue?

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides supplemental foods, nutrition education (including breastfeeding promotion and support), and referrals to healthcare and other social services to low-income, nutritionally at-risk women, infants, and children up to 5 years of age. Administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), WIC had an annual budget of \$6 billion and served more than 6 million people each month in fiscal year (FY) 2022 (Toossi & Jones, 2023). The USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) periodically reports on research findings relevant to WIC policy and program operations, often following major changes in the program's design. The last edition was published in January 2015. This 2024 edition explains how WIC works, discusses program trends, and summarizes research findings on key economic outcomes and policy issues facing the program, including program impacts on participants' diet quality and health, barriers and facilitators of program access, and State agency efforts to contain program costs. This report also outlines temporary changes to WIC in response to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the infant formula supply chain disruptions that occurred in 2022.



## What Did the Study Find?

WIC has served low-income, nutritionally at-risk women, infants, and children for 50 years. This report focuses on the following:

- **Access to WIC.** WIC operates on fixed annual funding from Congress. Reduced funding could prompt State agencies to adopt additional food cost containment policies, shorten certification periods (when allowed), or use a priority system for enrolling new applicants, all of which could influence an individual's ability to enroll in the program and/or use WIC benefits. Other factors that may influence WIC access include the location and number of local WIC agencies and WIC-authorized vendors in an area, as well as State variation in eligibility rules for means-tested programs that confer eligibility for WIC (e.g., Medicaid).

ERS is a primary source of economic research and analysis from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, providing timely information on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America.

- **Impact of WIC food package revisions on diet quality and health.** The WIC food packages provide foods to supplement key nutrients. Changes made to the food packages in 2009 aimed to further align the supplements with recommended dietary guidelines and the nutritional needs of breastfeeding participants. At the time, the 2009 food package revisions were the most significant changes to WIC since its inception. Studies found that the revisions were associated with improvements in the dietary quality of WIC households' food purchases, improvements in the dietary quality of foods available in the retail food environment, and reduced prevalence of obesity among children. In 2022, USDA proposed further revisions to the food packages to offer a wider variety of food options while aligning the food packages with the latest nutritional science.
- **Changes during the COVID-19 pandemic.** In response to the rising need for food and nutrition assistance during the pandemic and to support social distancing, USDA allowed temporary changes to WIC operations related to eligibility determination, recertification, and benefits issuance. The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 provided \$390 million for WIC outreach, innovation, and program modernization, which allowed USDA to extend some of the temporary program changes through FY 2024. Following the temporary changes to program operations and investments in program modernizations, total participation in WIC increased for the first time in more than a decade.
- **Infant formula supply chain disruptions.** Supply chain disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a recall of some powdered formulas in February 2022 made it difficult for households to find infant formula. USDA issued waivers to WIC State agencies allowing WIC households to return recalled infant formulas and purchase a broader range of formula brands and sizes. Using USDA, FNS monthly data on infant participation in WIC, researchers found the number of WIC infants receiving the fully breastfeeding food package increased following the supply chain disruptions. This analysis provided the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and White House leadership with potential reasons for why production of infant formula had returned to prior-year levels in the fall of 2022, but sales of infant formula remained below prior-year levels.

## How Was the Study Conducted?

Researchers from USDA, ERS examined WIC's laws and regulations; studied program trends using data from USDA, FNS and other sources; and reviewed numerous WIC-related research publications.