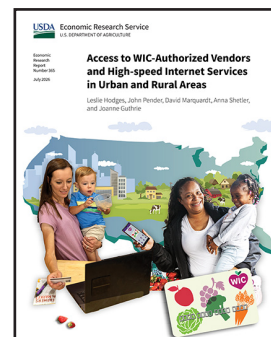




A report summary from the Economic Research Service

Access to WIC-Authorized Vendors and High-speed Internet Services in Urban and Rural Areas

Leslie Hodges, John Pender, David Marquardt, Anna Shetler,
and Joanne Guthrie



Key Points

- Half (49 percent) of census tracts, a geographic proxy for neighborhoods, in the United States had low access to a Special Supplemental Nutrition Program of Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)-authorized vendor in 2021. An estimated 2.5 million WIC-eligible families (49 percent of all WIC-eligible families) lived in these tracts.
- The national average distance to the nearest WIC-authorized vendor was 1.8 miles. Distances to the nearest WIC-authorized vendor were greater in rural areas and areas outside cities and towns (4–6 miles on average).
- Most census tracts (96.3 percent) had adequate access to fixed (93.5 percent) or mobile (85.5 percent) high-speed internet services, as of December 2020. Fixed high-speed internet services connect locations, like homes and businesses, to the internet at download/upload speeds of at least 25/3 Megabits per second. Mobile internet services use cellular networks to connect digital devices to the internet.
- An estimated 1.2 million WIC-eligible families (22.4 percent) did not have fixed or mobile high-speed internet subscriptions in 2019 across all census tracts. This included an estimated 888,494 families in urban census tracts and 273,092 families in rural census tracts. Internet subscriptions refer to paid arrangements that allow a household to access the internet (for example, a cellular data plan or cable, fiber optic, or DSL (Digital Subscriber Line) plan).
- In census tracts characterized by low access to a WIC-authorized vendor but adequate access to fixed or mobile high-speed internet services, one in five WIC-eligible families did not have high-speed internet subscriptions.

Why Does This Matter?

Many WIC State agencies have waivers in place to provide WIC services online, including some components of eligibility certification and nutrition education. In 2022, USDA increased the funding available to WIC State agencies for developing pilot projects to offer online grocery shopping as an option for participants to purchase WIC foods. In 2023, USDA proposed revisions to the Code of Federal Regulations to provide State agencies with permanent

flexibilities needed to offer online shopping options to participants. This study provides information relevant to these objectives by identifying areas across the United States where WIC-eligible families may have limited access to a physical store that accepts WIC benefits but adequate access to fixed or mobile high-speed internet services that could facilitate online shopping, as well as use of other WIC services. We document differences between rural and urban locations, as geography may impact retail and internet infrastructure.

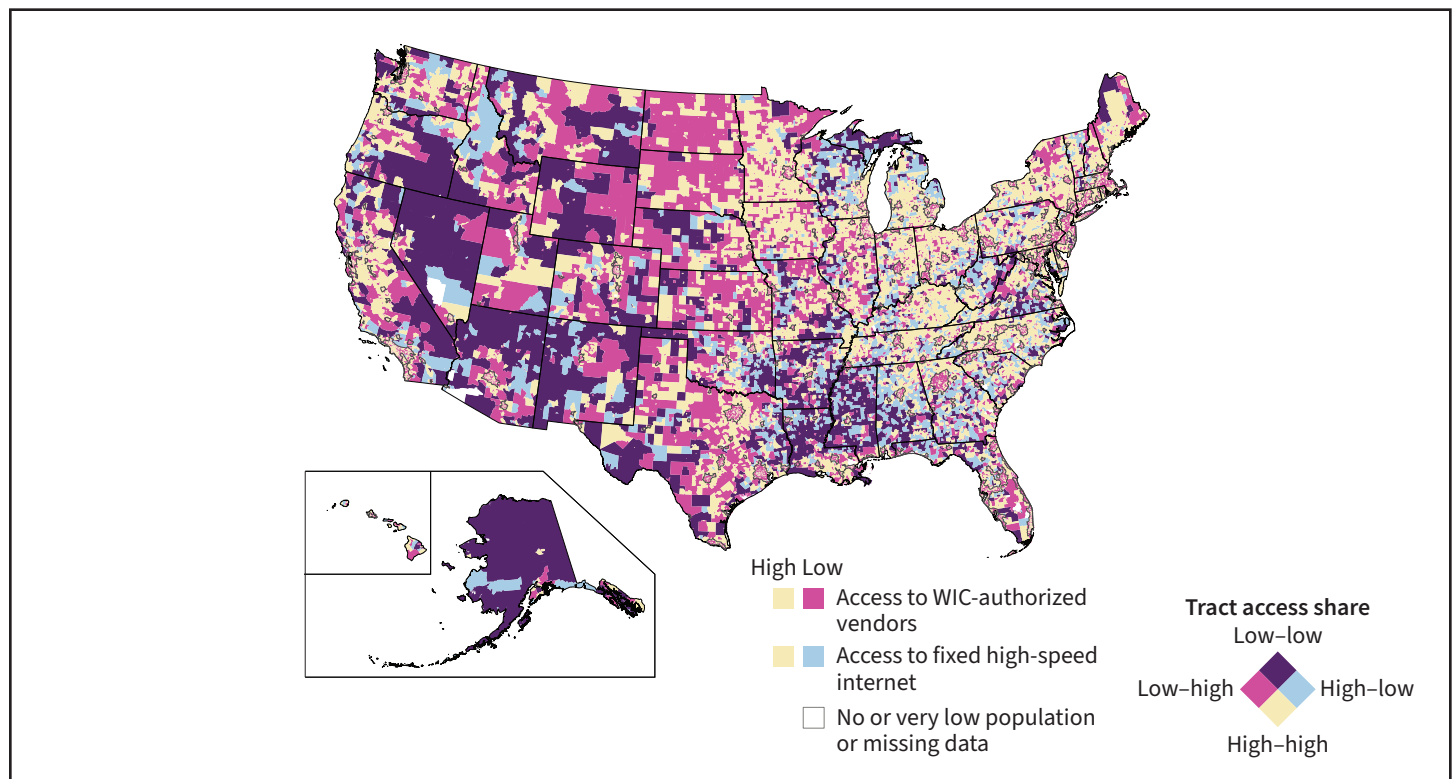
A Few More Details

Following the methodology of USDA, Economic Research Service's Food Access Research Atlas, low-access tracts had at least 500 people or 33 percent of the population living more than 1 mile (urban areas) or 10 miles (rural areas) from the nearest WIC vendor. Additionally, we considered the ability of WIC-eligible families to take advantage of food shopping online by measuring access to fixed and mobile high-speed internet services for U.S. census tracts.

In the figure below, tracts in purple had low access to both a WIC vendor and fixed high-speed internet services (3 percent of all tracts and an estimated 140,000 WIC-eligible families in 2015–19). Tracts in pink had low access to a WIC vendor but adequate access to fixed high-speed internet services (46 percent of all tracts and 2.4 million WIC-eligible families). Tracts in blue (4 percent) had adequate access to a WIC vendor but low access to fixed high-speed internet services. Tracts in yellow (47 percent) had adequate access to both.

Low access to a WIC vendor may require some WIC participants to travel further to a store that accepts WIC benefits, but it does not necessarily prevent them from redeeming their benefits. Likewise, low access to fixed high-speed internet does not necessarily limit use of online WIC services. Participants may have access to mobile internet provided through a cellular network or access to slower fixed internet connections. Additionally, on-premises internet access may be available at businesses and libraries via Wi-Fi.

Access to WIC-authorized vendors and fixed high-speed internet



Note: Number = 72,864 census tracts. Tracts with no or very low population = 333. Tracts with missing fixed high-speed internet data=15. Areas outlined within States are urban areas with more than 100,000 people. Low access to a Special Supplemental Nutrition Program of Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)-authorized vendor is defined as a census tract with at least 500 people or 33 percent of the population living more than 1 mile (urban areas) or 10 miles (rural areas) from the nearest WIC vendor. Low access to fixed high-speed internet services is defined as a census tract where less than 90 percent of the population live in census blocks with at least one residential service provider that advertises download speeds of at least 25 Megabits per second (Mbps) and upload speeds of at least 3 Mbps. WIC vendor data are as of fiscal year 2021. High-speed internet data are as of December 2020.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, Federal Communications Commission, and U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

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