

Future Research Directions

Since its inception as a small pilot program in the early 1970s, WIC has grown to become one of the cornerstones of the Nation's food and nutrition safety net for low-income children and women. During its 35-year existence, a number of legislative acts and new regulations helped shape the program. Now, over 8 million people participate in the program each month, including almost half of all infants and a quarter of all children ages 1-4. Expenditures for WIC total over \$6 billion per year, or 10 percent of total Federal Government expenditures for food and nutrition assistance.

Numerous issues are associated with a program of WIC's size and complexity. Addressing these issues is essential for several reasons: (1) WIC is one of the larger food assistance programs in terms of Federal expenditures, and the program must operate efficiently to protect taxpayers' investment; and (2) WIC serves as an entry point for early nutrition and health care intervention for a large number of the Nation's infants and children, so it is important that the program operate as effectively as possible.

This report has identified and framed some of the important economic issues surrounding WIC and suggested valuable areas of research. For example, WIC participation has expanded dramatically and more research is needed on the distributional effects of WIC participation to determine if society would be better served by an expanding program or by targeting more benefits to fewer, more needy families.

Major changes were made to the WIC food packages in 2007, and WIC State agencies are required to implement the revisions by October 1, 2009. Research will be needed to examine the impact of these changes on participants. For example, will the revised food packages affect participation and/or consumption and, if so, will some participant categories be more affected than others? Research will also be needed to examine how the revisions impact WIC vendors, food manufacturers, and non-WIC consumers.

The revised food packages increase breastfeeding incentives and promote healthy body weight for WIC participants. It is important to determine what impact the revisions will have on overweight and obesity among WIC children and the prevalence of breastfeeding among WIC mothers. Whether the revised food packages increase the prevalence and the duration of breastfeeding among WIC infant/mother pairs could have a significant impact on program costs.

Because of the volume of infant formula provided through WIC, increased costs of infant formula provided through WIC have a potentially large impact on WIC program costs. Therefore, the trends in infant formula rebates and retail markup of WIC formula brands need to be monitored.

Although considerable research has focused on WIC's impact on birth outcomes (with some contradictory findings), research on other program outcomes and participation groups is more limited. Furthermore, much of the

research is fairly old, capturing a program that is considerably different from the current program. For example, much of the existing research predates important changes in WIC, such as the expansion in participation, changes in the racial/ethnic composition of participants, and revisions in the WIC food packages. More research, reflecting the current program, is needed to fill the gaps with respect to WIC's impact on the different participant groups.

NSA funds, covering both administrative and key services, currently account for over a quarter of total program costs. Little is known, however, about how NSA funds are used. Better data are needed to determine how spending allocations on key services and administration impact the program's effectiveness.

WIC State agencies are required to spend at least a sixth of their NSA expenditures on nutrition education. Little is known, however, about the effectiveness of WIC's nutrition education. More research is needed on the types of education provided and their outcomes.

A number of economic factors could have a potentially large impact on WIC in the near future. Worsening economic conditions in this country and an increasing number of births could increase the demand for WIC services. At the same time, the program could be facing greater financial pressure from higher food prices and increased infant formula costs, in addition to the possibility of increased costs associated with WIC food package revisions. As a result, WIC may come under more scrutiny. Further investment in research that addresses these issues is needed.