

Characteristics of WIC Participants

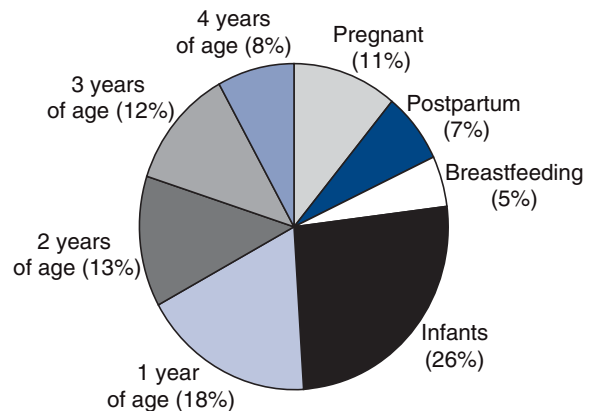
Every 2 years, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) reports on the characteristics of WIC participants and the agencies administering the program. The most recent report was published in 2000 and covers all persons enrolled in WIC as of April 1998 (Bartlett et al., 2000). In that month, 8 million women, infants, and children were enrolled in the program. About 7.4 million used vouchers, thereby putting the month's participation number at about 8 percent less than enrollment. For simplicity and comparability with the 1998 report's terminology, enrollees are referred to as participants in the following discussion of characteristics.

Some of the demographic and economic characteristics of WIC participants have changed over time. The more important changes in the characteristics of the WIC population between 1992 and 1998 are noted in the discussion below based on data from FNS' 1992 characteristics report (Randall and Boast, 1994).

Participant category. Children made up slightly more than half (51 percent) of all WIC participants in April 1998 (fig. 5). The proportion of children participating decreased as their ages increased: 36 percent of all WIC children were 1 year of age, 25 percent were 2 years of age, 22 percent were 3 years of age, and only 16 percent were 4 years of age. Infants accounted for 26 percent and women for 23 percent of all WIC participants. Almost half (48 percent) of the women who participated in WIC were pregnant, and 32 percent were postpartum, not breastfeeding. Twenty-one percent of all women in WIC were breastfeeding, up from 16 percent in 1992.

Race and ethnicity. In 1998, whites made up 39 percent of WIC participants, followed by Hispanics (32 percent), blacks (23 percent), Asians (3 percent), and Native Americans (2 percent). Hispanics have grown as a percentage of WIC participants during the 1990's (from 23 percent of WIC participants in 1992 to 32 percent in 1998) while percentages of non-Hispanic blacks and whites fell. The Hispanic population in the United States has grown faster than the other groups and the WIC program has increased foreign language

Figure 5
Distribution of WIC participants by participant category



Source: Bartlett et al., 2000.

outreach efforts, both trends contributed to the changing distribution by race and ethnicity during the 1990s (Bartlett, et al., 2000).

Nutrition risks. On the records used in the 1998 report, up to three nutrition risks could be reported for each WIC participant. Therefore, for participants with more than three nutrition risks, some risks will go unreported.²⁷ For women, general obstetrical risks and inadequate or inappropriate nutrient intake were the risks most often reported. For almost three-quarters of the infants, their mothers' current nutrition risk or their mothers' risk during pregnancy was cited as the reason for the infants' eligibility. For children, 68 percent had inappropriate or inadequate nutrient intake and 34 percent had anthropometric risks (such as low or high weight for height) as the risks most often documented.

Income and poverty status. In the 1998 participant records, 17 percent of the records had unreported

²⁷In addition, in some States, WIC agencies do not record all of a participant's nutrition risks. For example, some agencies only record the single most important nutritional risk.

income or income reported as zero. Either of these conditions may mean that the participant qualified based on other program participation and income data collection was not necessary. Zero may also mean that the participant's family had no cash income.

Participants with unreported income or income recorded as zero are left out of the income and poverty status calculations because their true income cannot be determined from the administrative records. Among WIC participants with reported income, the average annualized 1998 income of the participants' families/economic units was \$12,479. Among participant categories, breastfeeding women had the highest average income at \$13,607 and postpartum women had the lowest average income at \$11,532.

About 69 percent of the WIC participants reporting income had incomes at or below the poverty level. In contrast, fewer than 1 percent of participants had family income above the 185 percent of poverty threshold that caps participation in WIC (some participants with incomes above the cap can legally participate in WIC because Medicaid makes them eligible and Medicaid participation in several States is capped at income levels greater than 185 percent of the poverty guideline). The percentage of very poor WIC participants with incomes equal to or less than half of the poverty level

has decreased over time. In 1998, 34 percent of those WIC participants reporting income had incomes at or less than half the poverty level compared with 41 percent in 1992. WIC's expansion during the 1990s has allowed the program to serve more "near poor" participants with incomes between 100 and 185 percent of poverty (Bartlett et al., 2000).

Other program participation. Persons who participate in either the Medicaid, Food Stamp, or TANF programs are automatically income eligible for WIC. In 1998, 57 percent of WIC participants received benefits from at least one of these other public assistance programs at the time they were certified for WIC. Medicaid was received by 48 percent of WIC participants, food stamps by 27 percent of WIC participants, and TANF by 17 percent of WIC participants. Some WIC participants received benefits from more than 1 of these other programs including 15 percent who received benefits from all 3 of these other programs. Participation in Food Stamps, TANF/AFDC, and to a lesser extent Medicaid, has decreased since 1992 reflecting overall decreased participation in these programs since the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (also known as the welfare reform legislation) (Bartlett et al., 2000).