



Estimating Eligibility and Participation in WIC

Food Assistance Research Brief

Victor Oliveira, victoro@ers.usda.gov, (202) 694-5434

James Blaylock, jblayloc@ers.usda.gov, (202) 694-5402

Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report Number 34-3

July 2003

Issue: Each year, the United States Department of Agriculture estimates the number of people eligible to participate in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the number who will likely participate, and the expected cost of food. These estimates are used in developing budget requests for WIC, which is funded by appropriations law on an annual basis. If the number of people eligible and likely to participate in WIC is underestimated, the result is a shortage of funds available to fully serve them. If the number of WIC eligibles and participants is overestimated, an inefficient allocation of funds across programs occurs. Estimation of eligibility and participation is a complex process, due to data limitations, varying State program eligibility criteria, and alternate definitions of key variables.

Background: WIC provides supplemental food, nutrition education, and referrals to health care and other social services to low-income women, infants, and children who are at nutritional risk. The number of WIC participants has increased dramatically since the program began in 1974. In fiscal 2002, a record 7.5 million persons per month participated in the program, at a cost to taxpayers of over \$4.3 billion. The increase in the number of participants has been largely the result of increased congressional funding as well as cost-containment measures (fig. 1).

To qualify for WIC, applicants must meet categorical, income, and nutrition risk eligibility requirements.

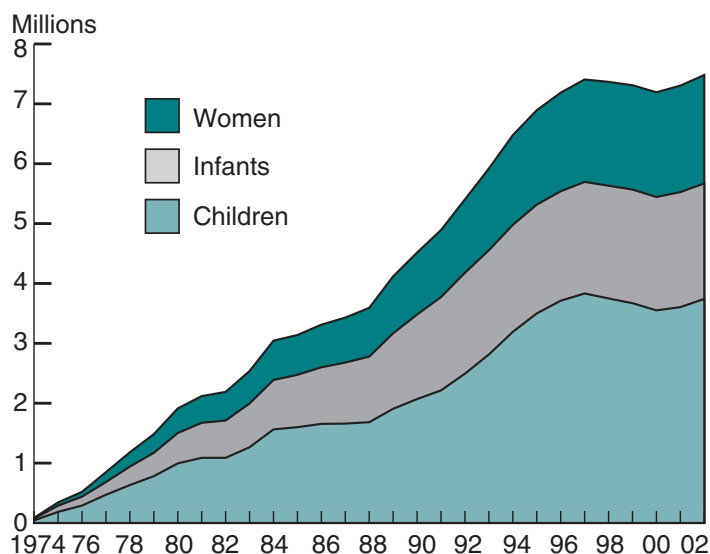
(1) *Categorical eligibility.* A WIC applicant must be: a pregnant woman, a nonbreastfeeding woman up to 6 months postpartum, a breastfeeding woman up to 1 year postpartum, an infant under 1 year of age, or a child up to his/her 5th birthday.

(2) *Income eligibility.* The family income of WIC applicants must be at or below 185 percent of the Poverty

Income Guidelines (\$33,485 for a family of four in July 2002). Applicants who participate or who have certain family members who participate in the Food Stamp, Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs, are adjunctively income eligible, that is, they are deemed to meet the income eligible criteria automatically.

(3) *Nutrition risk.* Applicants must be at nutrition risk, as determined by a health professional. Federal regulations recognize five major types of nutrition risk for WIC eligibility: (1) anthropometric risk (e.g., underweight or overweight); (2) biochemical risk (e.g., low hemoglobin or low hematocrit); (3) medical risk (e.g., diabetes mellitus); (4) dietary risk (e.g., failure to heed *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* recommendations); and (5) predisposing factors (e.g., homelessness).

Figure 1. Average number of WIC participants per month, fiscal years 1974-2002



Source: Food and Nutrition Service, USDA.

Findings: Estimating the number of eligibles who meet each of the three eligibility requirements, in practice, is difficult and complex. For example, although women are categorically eligible for WIC for their entire pregnancy, they are not likely to know that they are pregnant immediately. For the purposes of estimating eligibility, it is not clear if a pregnant woman should be considered categorically eligible at conception or when her pregnancy is confirmed. Data indicate that over half of all pregnant women in WIC enrolled when they were at least 4 months pregnant.

Once the issue of categorical eligibility is resolved, methods for determining income eligibility must be established. Many issues immediately surface. For example, the income eligibility of individuals is based on the size and income of their “family” or “economic unit.” However, the definition of what constitutes a family varies among the local WIC agencies that determine applicants’ eligibility. Another issue concerns the time frame for measuring income. WIC State agencies may consider either an applicant’s income during the past year or the applicant’s current income, whichever one better reflects the applicant’s status. Since income may vary considerably during the year (for example, income might drop during the birth of a child) estimates based on annual income will differ from those using a shorter period such as a month. Estimating income eligibility is also complicated by WIC adjunct eligibility with Medicaid enrollment. Income eligibility for Medicaid varies by State, with some State programs allowing participation with incomes greater than 185 percent of poverty, such as 275 percent in Minnesota.

The final step in estimating WIC eligibility is to determine the number of income-eligible people who are at nutritional risk. This task is complicated by the fact that there are about 70 different criteria that can be used in determining nutritional risk. If applicants meet any one of the criteria

they may be considered at nutritional risk. In practice, few income-eligible persons fail to meet at least one of the criteria.

Once the number of persons who are fully eligible for WIC has been estimated, the number of those eligible persons who would actually participate in the program must be estimated. Since little is known about WIC participation, food stamp participation rates in the past were used as proxies for WIC participation rates. However, because eligibility rules, target population, benefits, and degree of stigma differ between the programs, participation rates likely also differ.

Summary: In the first stage of a three-step project funded by the Economic Research Service (ERS) and administered by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., prepared a background report that for the first time reviewed the current methodology used to estimate the number of persons eligible for and participating in WIC. In the second stage, the National Research Council convened an expert panel that identified a number of factors that make estimating eligibility and participation in the WIC program uncertain. In the third stage of the study, the panel will examine alternative methods and data sources for estimating the number of persons eligible for WIC and those who are likely to participate if the program was fully funded. The final report from stage three is due summer 2003.

Information Sources:

Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. *Estimating the Number of People Eligible for WIC and the Full-Funding Participation Rate: A Review of the Issues*. February 12, 1999.

National Research Council, Committee on National Statistics, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. *Estimating Eligibility and Participation for the WIC Program: Phase 1 Report*. 2001.

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