

## Characteristics of WIC Participants

Descriptive information on the characteristics of WIC participants is available from USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (see box below, "FNS Data on WIC Participant Characteristics"). This chapter describes participants' characteristics in terms of participant categories, race and ethnicity, nutritional risks, participation in other programs, and income and poverty status.

### Participant Category

Children accounted for 49 percent of all WIC participants in April 2006 (fig. 8). The number of children in WIC decreased as their ages increased: 17 percent of all WIC participants were 1 year of age, 13 percent were 2 years of age, 11 percent were 3 years of age, and 8 percent were 4 years of age. Infants made up another 26 percent of all WIC participants. Women accounted for 25 percent of all WIC participants, with pregnant women making up 11 percent of all participants and nonbreastfeeding postpartum women and breastfeeding women each accounting for 7 percent of all participants. Among pregnant women, over half (51 percent) enrolled in the program during their first trimester and 38 percent in the second. Only 10 percent of pregnant women enrolled in their third trimester.

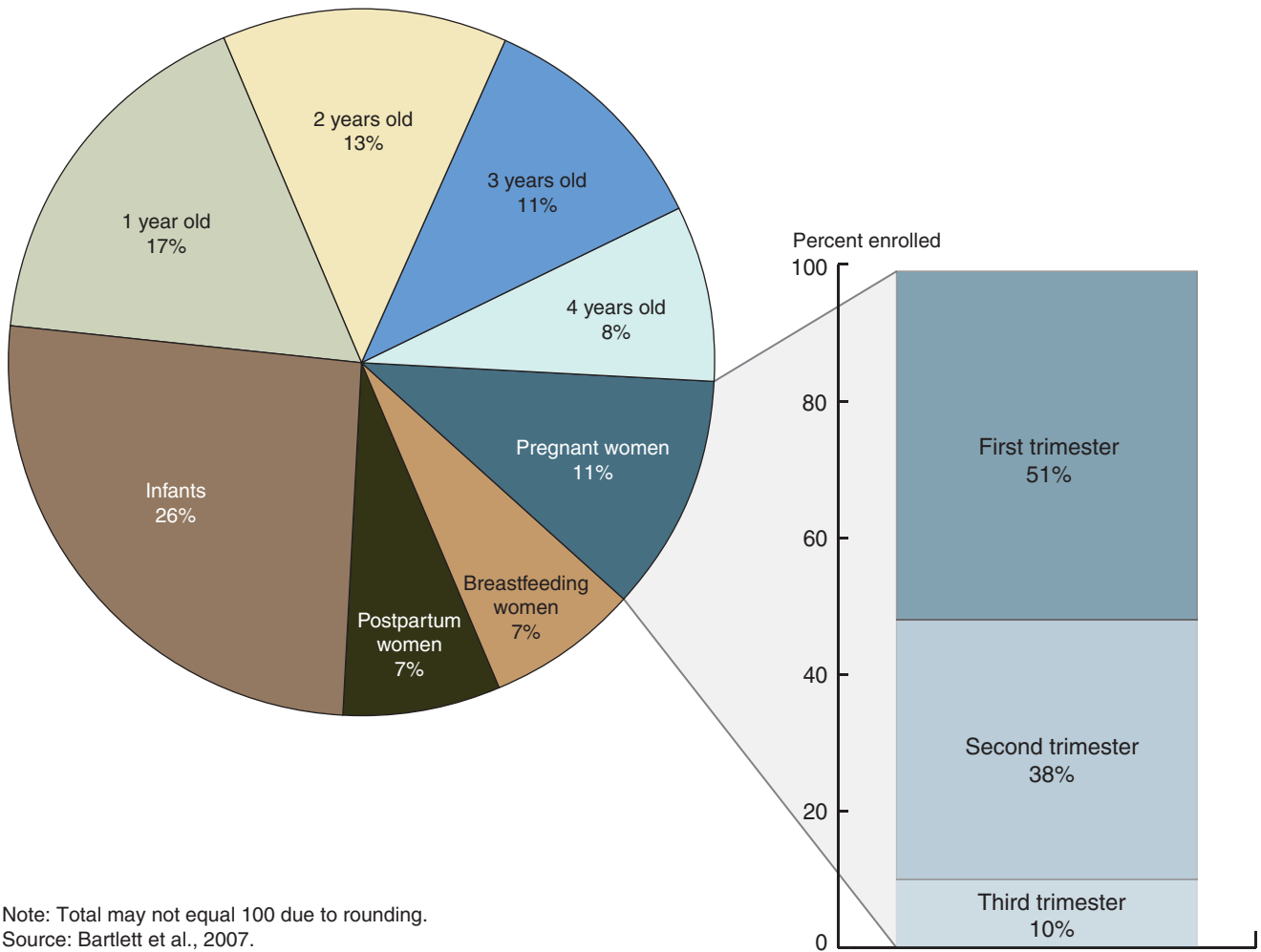
### Race and Ethnicity

One of the more dramatic trends that has emerged since the early 1990s is the change in the racial/ethnic composition of WIC participants. Accounting for only 23 percent of all participants in 1992, Hispanics accounted for 41 percent in 2006—more than any other racial/ethnic group (fig. 9). During the same period, the percentage of Whites and Blacks combined decreased from 72 percent to 52 percent.

#### FNS Data on WIC Participant Characteristics

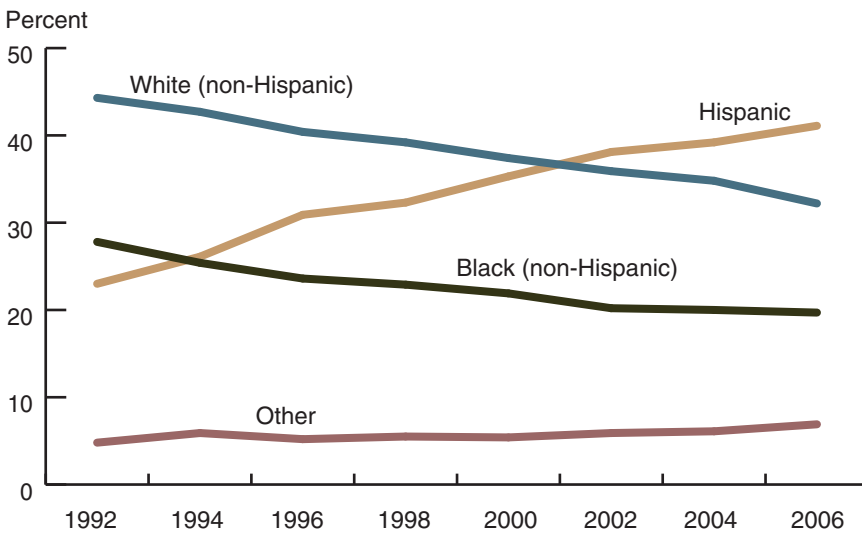
Every 2 years, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) sponsors a study on the characteristics of WIC participants and the agencies administering the program, publishing the results in the *WIC Participant and Program Characteristics* (PC) series of reports. The most recent report (PC2006) is based on a near-census of people enrolled in WIC in April 2006 (Bartlett et al., 2007). In that month, 8.8 million women, infants, and children were enrolled in the program. Only about 91 percent of enrollees, however, actually picked up their WIC food instruments. For simplicity and comparability with the PC reports' terminology, enrollees (including the 9 percent who did not pick up their WIC food instrument) are referred to as participants in the discussion of participant characteristics.

Figure 8  
**Distribution of WIC participants, by participation category, 2006**



Note: Total may not equal 100 due to rounding.  
 Source: Bartlett et al., 2007.

Figure 9  
**WIC participants, by race/ethnicity, 1992-2006**



Source: Bartlett et al., 2007.

## Nutritional Risks

For the PC2006, States could report each applicant’s 10 highest priority nutritional risks present at certification.<sup>54</sup> For women, high weight-for-height (46 percent), “other dietary” risks (40 percent), and inappropriate weight gain (30 percent) were the risks most often reported. Eighty-one percent of infants were recorded at risk due, at least in part, to the WIC-eligibility of their mothers or because their mothers were at risk during pregnancy. “Other dietary” risks (61 percent), inadequate or inappropriate nutrient intake (27 percent), and high weight-for-height (23 percent) were the most frequently recorded risks for children.

## Participation in Other Programs

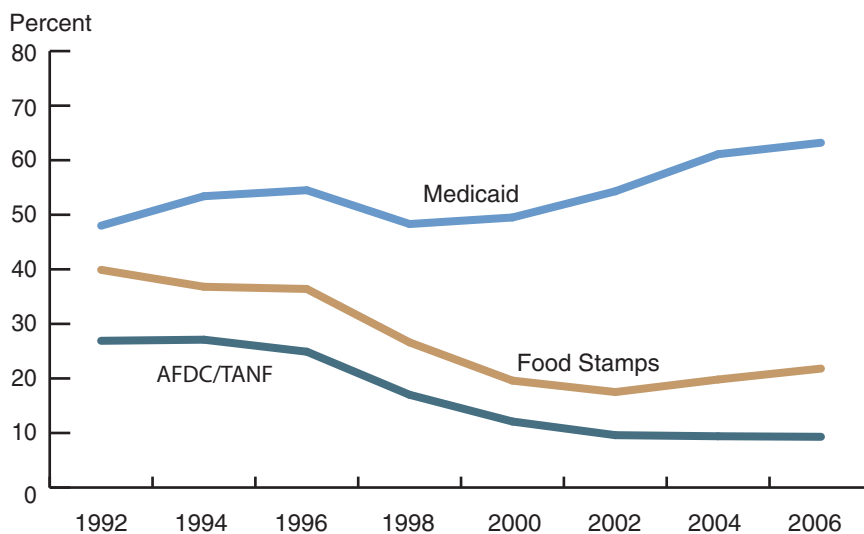
Participants from Medicaid, Food Stamp, or TANF programs are automatically income eligible for WIC. In 2006, 66 percent of WIC participants received benefits from at least one of these other public assistance programs at the time of their WIC certification, 16 percent received benefits from two of these programs, and 6 percent received benefits from all three.<sup>55</sup> Medicaid was received by 63 percent of WIC participants, food stamps by 22 percent, and TANF by 9 percent.

From 1992 to 2006, participation in the TANF or AFDC programs by WIC participants at time of certification decreased from 27 percent to 9 percent, reflecting the overall decline in participation in these programs since passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 (a.k.a., the Welfare Reform Act of 1996) that replaced AFDC with TANF (fig. 10). Similarly, participation among WIC participants in the Food Stamp Program fell from 40 percent to 22 percent due, at least in part, to fewer WIC participants meeting income eligibility requirements of

<sup>54</sup> Because States are not required to report all nutritional risks and because of possible variations in the methods States use and the number of risks they report, the data reported here may not provide a complete picture of nutritional risks among WIC participants.

<sup>55</sup> Because local WIC staff provide information on other programs at certification, some WIC participants may apply to other programs *after* information on their participation in other programs is recorded (Bartlett et al., 2007). As a result, participation estimates from other programs reported here may underestimate actual participation by WIC participants in those programs.

Figure 10  
**Share of WIC participants participating in other public assistance programs, 1992-2006**



Source: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, PC data, various years.

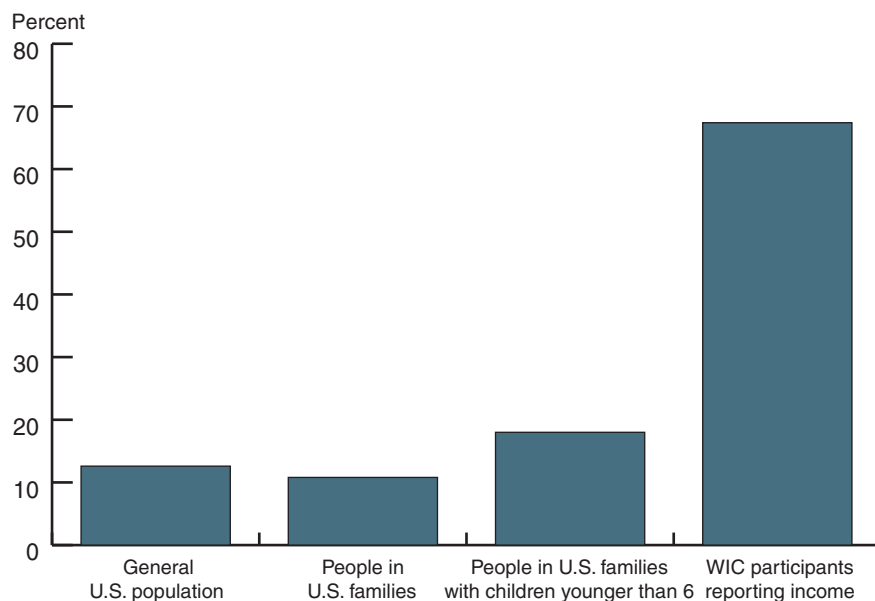
the Food Stamp Program.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, participation in the Medicaid program by WIC participants at time of certification increased from 48 percent in 1992 to 63 percent in 2006. Implementation of two legislative changes, the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) and Title XXI of the Balanced Budget Act of 1997—which expanded Medicaid eligibility for children—contributed to the increase in Medicaid participation among WIC participants (Bartlett et al., 2007). (For additional information on the effect of Medicaid participation on WIC, see the section on the “Expansion of the WIC Program,” p. 31.)

## Income and Poverty Status

In the PC2006, almost 10 percent of participants had missing values for income (86 percent of those with missing income were adjunctively income eligible due to their participation in the Medicaid, Food Stamp, or TANF Programs). Among WIC participants with reported income in 2006, the average annualized income of their family/economic units was \$15,577. Most WIC participants were poor; two-thirds (67 percent) of those reporting income were at or below the poverty level compared with 13 percent of the general population (fig. 11). In contrast, 2 percent of participants reporting income had incomes above the 185 percent of poverty guidelines that cap WIC participation (some participants with incomes above the cap can legally participate in WIC because Medicaid participation makes them income eligible and Medicaid participation in several States is capped at income levels greater than 185 percent of the poverty guidelines).

<sup>56</sup> The monthly income of most households must be 130 percent or less of the Federal poverty guidelines to be eligible for food stamps. Over time, the number of WIC participants with incomes over 130 percent of the poverty level has slightly increased. For example, PC data indicate that about 13 percent of WIC participants reporting income had incomes of 131 percent of poverty or higher in 1992 compared with about 18 percent in 2006. As a result, a smaller percentage of WIC participants have been eligible for food stamps in recent years.

Figure 11  
**People in poverty, 2006**



Source: Bartlett et al., 2007.