

**FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE (FNS)  
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN – FISCAL YEAR 2018**

**MAY 2018**

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**Please Note:** This plan is a forecast of projects FNS expects to pursue in fiscal year 2018, but it is subject to modification without notice based on funding availability and program priorities.

**FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE  
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**INTRODUCTION**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) conducts a variety of studies, evaluations, and related activities that respond to the needs of policymakers and managers and help ensure that nutrition assistance programs achieve their goals effectively. This plan provides short descriptions of projects that are expected to be launched in fiscal year (FY) 2018. It reflects decisions by FNS' program and research staff and leadership on the best use of available research funding to meet current information needs that are aligned with agency priorities to improve program efficiency, integrity, and nutrition. It was developed in consultation with the agencies of the Research, Education, and Economics (REE) mission area.

In addition to consulting on the development of the annual Research and Evaluation Plan, REE staff members regularly participate as valued experts in the development of study design specifications and data collection plans, and they also serve on advisory and technical panels for the studies.

Projects also include work conducted through partnerships between FNS and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture to improve diets through such efforts as the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Program.

Through these partnerships, USDA ensures that we utilize the respective strengths and expertise of each agency in support of the USDA mission. Close collaboration across the Department ensures the studies included in the plan reflect the best science in order to inform evidence-based policy development in Federal nutrition assistance programs.

## **STRATEGIC GOAL: PROVIDE AMERICANS WITH SAFE, NUTRITIOUS, AND SECURE FOOD**

### **ENSURE FNS PROGRAMS PAVE A PATHWAY TO SELF-SUFFICIENCY**

#### **Effectiveness of Job Search as an Employment & Training Component**

Most States offer independent job search or job search training as an employment and training (E&T) activity. Job search is the most offered component of SNAP E&T services, but little is known about its effectiveness at connecting SNAP participants to employment, particularly when it isn't linked to other education or skills training. The study seeks to collect similar outcome data across a limited number of States that offer job search services to assess its overall effectiveness, particularly as a stand-alone intervention, and whether certain types of job search are more effective than others. In these States, a process evaluation will be conducted to understand how job search services operate and where there are areas for improvement.

#### **Improving Notices to Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents**

State agencies must track the eligibility of Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs) as these individuals are limited to three months of SNAP benefit receipt in a 36-month period unless the individual is meeting the work requirements, lives in an area that is waived from the time limit, or is exempt from the time limit. States develop their own notices to send to ABAWDs to inform them that their three months of eligibility is about to end, unless the individual qualifies for an exemption or verifies that the work requirement has been met. State practices vary in terms of the timing of these notices as well as the information included. It is challenging to find a balance between an easily understood notice and one that is comprehensive in describing the possible exemptions for which the individual may qualify. This study will look at notices from a number of States and use cognitive testing with low-income individuals to develop best practices and sample notices that States can use to notify ABAWDs of their eligibility status.

#### **Review of the School Breakfast Program (SBP)**

Nearly fifteen million elementary, middle, and high school students participate daily in the School Breakfast Program, about half the number who participate in the National School Lunch Program. Studies have shown that eating breakfast provides nutritional and academic benefits. This review will update the evidence on 1) the benefits of eating breakfast on school performance, weight, and health; and 2) best practices in SBP, including models of breakfast delivery and costs. The review will also summarize trends in the percent of school children who do not eat breakfast and trends in participation in the Federal School Breakfast Program. Recommendations for future research on school breakfast will be included in the review.

### **UTILIZE DATA-DRIVEN STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE PROGRAM INTEGRITY**

#### **Extent of SNAP Benefit Trafficking: 2015-2017**

This study will update estimates of the extent of trafficking – the exchange of food benefits for cash – using the results of undercover investigations and EBT-based administrative case actions against retailers suspected of trafficking. The update of this key program performance metric will cover the period 2015-2017.

### **Understanding the Causes of SNAP Trafficking**

Trafficking is the exchange of SNAP benefits for cash. It is often assumed that individuals engage in this illegal activity because they do not need the food benefits, but there may be other reasons as well – households may not understand that exchanging SNAP benefits for cash is prohibited or may be facing immediate financial pressures. This study will conduct interviews with a nationally representative sample (if possible) of individuals that have been disqualified from SNAP to better understand their reasons for engaging in trafficking. The study will also try to assess whether trafficking is linked to broader trends, such as the rise in unemployment, the decrease in cash TANF benefits, or SNAP modernization efforts. Results from this study will help inform methods for identifying and preventing trafficking. The study will also help improve guidance to State Agencies on how to educate participants to reduce the incidence of trafficking.

### **Understanding the Impact of SNAP Online Applications**

Currently, 44 States have online applications for SNAP benefits which has greatly increased efficiency and improved customer service. However, the opportunity to apply for SNAP without needing to visit an office or be seen in person, may have unintended consequences for both eligible individuals and program integrity. With the advent of online applications, there are fewer SNAP offices which may make it more difficult for some populations that need assistance with applying or recertifying for SNAP to obtain help. Applying online may make it easier to commit certain types of fraud. This study will assess the potential impact(s) of online applications in terms of customer service, identity theft, dual participation in more than one State, payment errors, and other concerns. Also, the study will look at the impact of other State factors, such as service kiosks and the number of SNAP offices. The study seeks to collect data from up to nine States to better understand and address the impact(s) that may arise from SNAP online applications.

### **How States Safeguard Participant Personally Identifiable Information**

This study will develop and administer a survey to all 53 SNAP State Agencies to catalog how States are currently protecting applicant and participant personally identifiable information (PII) submitted through SNAP applications or maintained in SNAP eligibility systems. How States protect PII in the context of data matching is of particular interest. The results of the survey will be used to identify best practices that can be shared with all State Agencies.

### **Assessing the Reasons Behind Atypical SNAP Account Activity**

On average, households redeem 80 percent of their SNAP benefits in the first 2 weeks after issuance and 97 percent by a month after issuance. The majority of transactions take place at retailers in their local area. However, there is a small share of households that deviate from this typical pattern. Some households carry large balances on their SNAP Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) account from month to month. Others regularly redeem their benefits at retailers outside their home State or a contiguous State. This study seeks to understand the reasons behind the usual account activity by analyzing EBT transaction data and then conducting interviews with SNAP State agencies or SNAP households.

### **Testing of Client Integrity Education Messages**

FNS and State agencies have developed guidance and sample messages to assist States in educating SNAP clients about how they may and may not use their benefits. However, these messages are largely untested, so it is not known whether clients understand the messages or whether the messages produce the intended results. This study will fill that gap by testing the efficacy of client education messages developed by FNS and/or State agencies.

### **WIC Certification Error Estimates – Aging for IPERA Reporting (annual) (Internal Analysis)**

This project conducts the annual aging of data on WIC certification errors for reporting the USDA financial reports. It helps fulfill the requirements of the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Act (IPERA) of 2010. Data from a national survey of WIC participants conducted in 2008-2009 are adjusted annually using data from the WIC Participant and Program Characteristics report series and other WIC administrative data.

### **Child Nutrition Operations Study–II (CN-OPS-II)**

FNS uses multi-year panel studies to collect and analyze data on select operational aspects of the Child Nutrition programs. This includes a wide range of descriptive information from the State and school district levels, as well as data on topics of current interest, such as the level of State and local subsidies beyond Federal reimbursements, nutrition education and promotion in schools, policies regarding unpaid meal balances, professional standards and training requirements, and compliance with the Buy American provision. The panel data covers the four school years (SY) starting with SY 2015-2016. FY2018 funds will be used to support data collection in SY 2018-2019. Results can inform Child Nutrition program management and policy development.

### **Integrity of the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)**

The SFSP provides payments for nutritious meals served to children at approved sites that meet eligibility requirements during extended periods of school closures. State agencies have a critical program integrity role in ensuring compliance with Program regulations, providing training, and conducting oversight reviews of sponsors and sites. This national study will examine how various State Agencies successfully administer and provide effective Program oversight. The study will consider Program characteristics, location (such as differences in rural and urban areas), and best practices and challenges associated with each model. It will also identify potential barriers to ensuring the integrity and effective management of Program operations. The survey will provide additional insight into nationwide integrity challenges existing in the SFSP. The study results will help FNS identify what resources, training, or technical assistance may be necessary to provide State Agencies in their effective administration and monitoring of the SFSP. The second purpose of this study is to define improper payment measures for SFSP, identify potential methods for accurately estimating improper payments, and test the viability of these approaches through data collection from a sample of SFSP sponsors and sites.

## **PROVIDE AMERICANS WITH ACCESS TO NUTRITIOUS FOOD**

### **Modernizing Channels of Communication with SNAP Participants**

Improving our understanding of how SNAP participants use various communication channels, such as smartphones, social media, internet, and other communication technologies, can enhance SNAP communication and education activities. The availability and adoption of new

communication technologies has increased vastly over the last decade, providing new and more effective communication channels to reach SNAP participants. Currently, through regulation, FNS primarily uses postal mail as the primary source of information dissemination. Several States are employing new technologies, such as SMS texting, to supplement traditional notification practices and address various challenges SNAP participants face. This study would evaluate case studies to highlight best practices and lessons learned from various pilots tested in State SNAP agencies.

### **Understanding Food Related Hardship Among Older Americans**

Historically older Americans (age 60+) have participated in SNAP at half the rate of other eligible individuals. In 2015, 83 percent of all individuals who were eligible for SNAP received benefits compared to only 42 percent of eligible older Americans. There is still much to learn about the factors that contribute to food insecurity and other food-related hardships among older adults in the United States, and the role that nutrition assistance programs such as SNAP may play in ameliorating these conditions. This project will establish a research grant program to examine food insecurity in seniors and the implications for nutrition assistance programs through analysis of extant data and some small scale primary data collection. The results of the analyses will be summarized in an integrated research review.

### **An Examination of the Design of SNAP Online Applications**

The availability of online applications for SNAP benefits has increased efficiency and improved customer service by providing applicants greater flexibility in when, where and how they can submit their applications. Currently, 44 States have online applications. This study will conduct an in-depth review of users' comprehension of SNAP online applications through cognitive testing with low-income individuals of diverse characteristics. This testing will include examining the differences in usability due to factors such as age, education, race/ethnicity, language skills, sources of income, and other relevant factors that affects the submission of complete and accurately filled applications for both regular and expedited processing. The review will also assess the design and layout of a set of selected online applications including the length, graphic design, instructions, order of questions and other features based on relevant evidence-based research. The results of this study will be used to improve the application and the instructions for completing and submitting online applications.

### **An Examination of the Design of SNAP Retailer Applications**

Retailers interested in redeeming SNAP benefits must submit an application, either on paper or online, to FNS for authorization or for reauthorization to continue redeeming benefits past the initial approval period. Applicants vary from large retail chains to small grocery stores and farmers markets, and they may have varying skill levels needed to complete the application. This study will conduct an in-depth review of users' comprehension of SNAP retailer applications through cognitive testing. This testing will include examining the differences in usability due to factors such as age, education, race/ethnicity, language skills, and other relevant factors that affects the submission of complete and accurately filled applications. The review will also assess the design and layout of a set of selected retailer applications including the length, graphic design, instructions, order of questions and other features based on relevant evidence-based research. The results of this study will be used to improve the SNAP retailer applications for new and reauthorizing retailers and develop guidance for retailers to submit complete and accurate applications to FNS.

### **WIC Eligibles Estimates (annual)**

This project, the latest in a series, will develop a set of national and State level estimates of the number of individuals eligible for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) benefits in 2017. The report will present estimates by participant subgroup at the national level, and WIC coverage rates for all national and State level estimates. This annual study examines how well WIC reaches eligible women and children. Results are used in the budget process to support program management and address program performance.

### **WIC and SNAP Participation among Military Families**

FNS will collaborate with the Department of Defense (DoD) to provide national estimates of the percent of military families eligible for WIC and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the coverage rates among military families, barriers to program participation, innovative methods of benefit delivery, and recommendations to improve WIC and SNAP customer service to military families. This is the first study to examine nutrition assistance program eligibility and participation among military families. To conduct the study, FNS will seek to add questions to an existing DoD survey.

### **Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) for Children Evaluation**

The Summer EBT for Children demonstrations were authorized and funded by Congress in 2010 as a complement to traditional summer meal programs. A rigorous evaluation showed that Summer EBT substantially reduced food insecurity among children and increased the consumption of healthy foods. This study will continue to examine benefit use (participation, redemption). Also, as new grantees will be added in 2018, the study will provide an examination of the start-up challenges and costs experienced by these new grantees, as well as those that have expanded to additional areas.

## **FACILITATE AN INCREASE IN HEALTHY DIETS GROUNDED IN FOOD-BASED SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE**

### **Diet Quality of Americans by Program Participation Status: 2011-2014**

All of the major Federal nutrition assistance programs include improved nutrition among their goals. A critical research question when studying the effectiveness of these programs, therefore, is the relationship between program participation and dietary outcomes. This project will address what low-income Americans eat, compare their diets to accepted standards for healthy eating, and examine the relationship between program participation and dietary intake. It will build on the existing research by using the most current information from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey to compare the diets of SNAP, NSLP, and WIC participants to non-participants. The study will produce separate reports for each of the three programs.

### **Support for NHANES Data Collection on WIC Participants**

The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) collects detailed information, including dietary intake, anthropometry, and health status, from a nationally representative sample of Americans annually to enable tracking of diet and health related information over time. This project will provide support to collect information on infants and young children under age 5 years on NHANES to ensure that the data set can be used for rigorous analysis of feeding practices, dietary intake, nutrient status, growth, and health of



infants and young children participating in WIC, including comparisons to children who meet WIC eligibility standards but are not participating in the program and children from higher income families. The project will also provide support to better define WIC participation of NHANES survey participants and better understand reasons for discontinuing WIC benefits or not initiating benefits.

### **WIC Breastfeeding Peer Counselor Study 3**

WIC supports a participant's decision to breastfeed unless medically contraindicated. This series of reports provides a detailed assessment of State and local WIC agency breastfeeding peer counseling activities including the *Loving Support*® Peer Counseling Program, which employs and trains women from the local community to offer breastfeeding support to WIC participants. The previous studies provided information for 2008 and 2014. This project will update this information and expand the scope to include additional information on WIC breastfeeding outcomes to contribute to program management and evaluation.

### **Redemption of WIC Cash Value Voucher/Cash Value Benefit (CVV/CVB)**

In 2009, the WIC program introduced CVV/CVB for the purchase of fruits and vegetables for participating women and children. Despite the popularity of this added benefit provided as part of the revised WIC food package, it has been underutilized. A study conducted in 3 states showed that while 73% of CVV/CVB benefits were redeemed, only about 37% were fully redeemed (Phillips, Bell, Morgan, and Pooler, 2014). This study will identify factors associated with the under redemption of WIC CVV/CVB and possible solutions for improving redemption and utilization rates. Findings will enhance guidance to States on increasing utilization of the benefits.

### **Farm to School Census**

Farm to School programs aim to strengthen knowledge about agriculture, food, nutrition, and the environment; increase children's consumption of fruits and vegetables; increase opportunities for farmers and other food producers; and support economic development. This census study will provide information on the magnitude of local sourcing procurement and the prevalence of other farm to school activities during School Year (SY) 2017/2018 and SY 2018/2019.

### **Participation of Teens in Child Nutrition Programs**

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) are among the Federal Child Nutrition programs that provide nutritious food to school-aged children who face food insecurity. Despite these programs, qualitative data suggests that food insecure teens may not utilize feeding programs to the fullest extent due to the stigma surrounding hunger (Waxman, Popkin, & Galvez, 2016). This study will examine participation of high-school aged students in Federal Child Nutrition programs, including NSLP, SBP, after school meals, and summer feeding programs. The study will include measurement of food insecurity and survey teens about barriers to participation in Child Nutrition programs and factors that would increase their participation.

### **Institutional and Participant Characteristics of Residential Child Care Institutions (RCCI)**

This study will provide a nationally representative description of the Residential Child Care Institutions (RCCIs) participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and no longer participating in NSLP. Institutional factors such as nature of the institution, size, and population

served, and food service operation will be examined. Reasons for leaving NSLP and relationships between the State and RCCI will be explored as well as institutional and participant characteristic factors associated with leaving NSLP.

## **OTHER SUPPORT FOR PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE**

### **Examining “Buy American” in the School Meals Programs**

School Food Authorities (SFAs) have been required under statute (PL 105-336) since 1999 to “purchase, to the maximum extent practicable, domestic commodities or products.” They can ask for exemptions to obtain products that are not available domestically or are cost-prohibitive. We currently have three studies examining SFA activities that include questions on the Buy American provision in SFAs and how SFAs ensure compliance, document the use of exemptions, and train staff on local purchasing. The studies will examine the number and types of exemptions in use and identify best practices for Buy American provisions, along with training and technical assistance needs for SFAs. This project will produce a white paper focusing on the Buy American provisions of these studies, with policy recommendations on how to maximize the benefits of the provision.

### **Evaluation of the Child Nutrition Special Grants**

The authorizing legislation for the Child Nutrition Programs provides funding for a number of different grants intended to stimulate program improvement. This includes Team Nutrition Grants, Administrative Reviews and Training Grants, Direct Certification Improvement Grants, Equipment Purchase Grants, and Farm to School Grants. This project will independently evaluate the impacts of grant programs on their intended outcomes to inform decision-making on how they are designed. Findings from this project will also inform revisions to grant requirements to improve grantee reporting on specific evaluation metrics and participation in grant evaluations.

### **Researcher Initiated Grants for Child Nutrition Studies**

This project provides funding to researchers to conduct innovative research related to FNS priorities to improve customer service and program content to achieve the intended goals of CN programs. Some of the grant funds may be distributed through a partnership with ERS’s RIDGE program.

### **Evaluation of FNS guidance for program operation**

This study will evaluate FNS guidance materials used at the Regional, State, and local levels. Examples of guidance to evaluate include but are not limited to School Meals Eligibility manual, Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Handbooks, and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) guidance.

### **Measuring SNAP Access, Trends and Impacts (Microsimulation)**

This ongoing project supports several key analytic tools and analyses to address SNAP participation trends and impacts; generates annual reports on the characteristics, participation rates and patterns of participation; and supports the Agency’s capacity to respond to proposed changes to SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs by estimating the cost and distributional impacts.

### **WIC Food Package Cost Report (annual)**

This report is an essential component of regulatory impact analyses (RIAs) on WIC food package changes. The report determines the pre- and post-rebate cost to WIC of providing foods for 17 food categories. The most recent report estimated the national average food package cost by participant category. These estimates contribute to WIC cost projections and responding to requests from the Agency and Department to estimate the cost of legislative and regulatory alternatives. This project would provide estimates for FY2017 and the contract vehicle to obtain additional years estimates.

### **SNAS Analysis and Modeling**

This funding will provide financial support for a variety of analyses that are conducted to respond to legislative, budget and policy questions critical to SNAS programs. The funding could support additional analyses using existing data sources including data sets from complete large nationally representative studies.

### **Quick Response Studies for FNS Programs**

In addition to its large-scale evaluations, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is building the capacity to field single-topic studies with shorter timeframes that respond to current policy and program needs. This funding will support these efforts to ensure FNS has multiple avenues available to support its practice of evidence-based decision-making.

### **Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: Report to Congress**

This project will generate the required annual report to Congress on the effectiveness of State and local efforts to certify Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participant children for free school meals without the need for household applications. It will calculate state-specific performance metrics from data reported by State agencies and school food authorities. The project will also highlight direct certification operations in a handful of States for insight into successful strategies and promising practices.

### **Child Nutrition Analysis and Modeling**

This funding will provide financial support for a variety of analyses that are conducted to respond to legislative, budget and policy questions critical to FNS programs. The funding could support additional analyses using existing data sources including data sets from complete large nationally representative studies.

### **Incentives for Reducing Non-Response Bias**

This funding will be used to examine the effectiveness of incentives on reducing non-response to FNS studies and focus groups.