

**FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE  
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN – FISCAL YEAR 2010**

**NOVEMBER 17, 2009**

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**USDA PRIORITY: ALL OF AMERICA'S CHILDREN  
HAVE ACCESS TO SAFE, NUTRITIOUS AND BALANCED MEALS**

***FNCS Priority: End Childhood Hunger by 2015***

**Understanding Childhood Hunger:** Success in reducing or eliminating childhood hunger will require a clearer and more complete understanding of why children go hungry in the United States. This project will use a variety of quantitative and qualitative (including ethnographic) research methods to collect new data and information, including community-based input, to more fully address the circumstances, characteristics and coping strategies of families with food insecure children and the factors that distinguish low-income families who are food secure from those who are not. The findings should provide greater clarity on the nature of childhood food insecurity and risk of hunger, and how nutrition assistance and other programs can better address them.

**Improve Data Collection on Food Insecurity:** The Administration's commitment to end childhood hunger by 2015 has underscored the need for additional data collection and analysis to support evidence-based solutions. To deepen the knowledge base, FNS will work with the Economic Research Service to add a food security module to the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), a nationally representative annual survey sponsored by the National Center for Health Statistics, and conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. Adding food security questions to this survey will provide a major data source that could corroborate national monitoring statistics now collected through the Current Population Survey, and will significantly augment our ability to examine and analyze (1) linkages between food insecurity and a broad range of health outcomes with reasonable controls for income and household demographics; (2) seasonal patterns of food insecurity, such as the extent to which food insecurity in households with children is more prevalent in the summer; and (3) the relationship between food insecurity with disability. (Work-limiting disability is known to be a strongly associated with food insecurity, but details of, and reasons for, the association are still unclear.)

**Summer Food for Children Pilot Projects and Evaluation:** The 2010 Agriculture Appropriations Act includes funding for pilot projects to demonstrate the impact of new food delivery methods during the summer to test whether alternatives to existing programs can be more effective in reaching children in need. Projects will test the provision during the summer of "SNAP-like" EBT-based benefits and "WIC-like" food package vouchers for families with children, as well as incentives to encourage more summer feeding sites and operation of such sites for more days during the summer. The Act calls for a rigorous evaluation of the projects. We plan to launch some incentive-focused pilots in the summer of 2010 and begin initial pilot and evaluation design work on the other direct-to-student approaches.

**Measuring the Effect of SNAP Participation on Food Security:** This study is designed to determine the effect of SNAP benefits, including the higher (post-ARRA) allotments, on food security of new SNAP entrants at the time they enter the program and then again after participating for about six months. A sample of households recertifying for SNAP will also be included to examine the relationship between duration of program participation and food security. The anticipated improvement in food security following entrance into the program will

provide the first direct measure of SNAP's effectiveness. We will also compare 2008 and 2009 food security data from the Current Population Survey, to show the general prevalence and characteristics of food insecure households before and after the Recovery Act's benefit increase.

**Promoting Effective Direct Certification Systems and Strategies:** This project will update a study conducted in 2005 on the feasibility and effectiveness of using computer matching systems to directly certify low-income children receiving SNAP for school meals. The new study will survey the information systems and database characteristics that are used by States and school districts to identify advances and improvements since the last survey, and will analyze performance differences that may correlate with these characteristics based on the agency's annual direct certification reporting. The results will support the Agency's effort to promote wider and more effective use of direct certification.

**Understanding the Relationship between Hunger and Obesity:** Recent research suggests that household food insecurity may be related to overweight in women and sometimes in children and men. However, these findings raise more questions than they resolve – it remains unclear whether food insecurity causes excess weight gain that leads to obesity, why food security might be related to obesity, and the pathway through which its influence might be felt. It is not likely that further analysis of pertinent existing data, which is relatively limited, will shed further light on these issues. This project will convene a workshop under the auspices of the National Academies to assess the current state of research and propose new data, analyses, or other means to push the science base forward. The results of this project will help guide future research investments.

### ***FNCS Priority: Develop a Comprehensive National Effort to Reduce Obesity***

**Healthy Incentives Pilot Evaluation:** The Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 provided \$20 million to pilot test the effect of monetary incentives at the point-of-sale to encourage low-income persons to purchase more fruits, vegetables, or other healthy foods, and conduct a rigorous evaluation to assess dietary and health impacts. This study will evaluate the impact of HIP incentives on fruit and vegetable purchases by SNAP participants. It will use an experimental design in which households within each pilot community are randomly assigned to receive an incentive or not. Purchase and consumption information will be collected directly from households. This allows FNS to measure differences in the overall purchase and consumption of target foods and to rule out substitution effects.

**National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Study (FoodAPS):** The Economic Research Service is preparing to conduct a survey on food-related expenditures and food acquisition among low-income households. The data collected will permit comparisons between SNAP participants and non-participants, and provide information on such questions as:

- How do price and income influence food choices and the dietary quality of food purchases?
- What do SNAP participants buy and how much does it cost?
- How does nutrition assistance program participation influence food purchases and acquisitions?
- What is the relationship between food acquisition decisions and levels of food security?

- How do access and retail outlet choice influence food purchases and the resulting dietary quality of purchases?
- What is the influence of nutrition knowledge and attitudes on food purchases?

FNS contributed some initial funding and worked with ERS staff to define the study parameters. In 2010, we will provide funding to allow ERS to exercise an option to increase the sample of low-income households that do not participate in nutrition assistance.

**School Meals Standards Update: Analytical Support:** The Institute of Medicine recently released recommendations to align school meals requirements with the latest Dietary Guidelines for Americans. FNS expects to begin rulemaking and seek public comment to implement these recommendations. This project will support analyses of School Nutrition Dietary Assessment data to address questions that arise as standards change. It will also allow support for additional analysis of a la carte service, which may be of particular interest if CN/WIC reauthorization expands FNS authority to cover all foods at school.

### ***FNCS Priority: Make Nutrition Education More Effective***

**Identifying High-Performing Nutrition Promotion Strategies:** FNCS is working with its program partners to focus limited nutrition education resources and strategies on interventions that offer the greatest promise in changing behavior. However, the evidence base for the characteristics of such interventions is not as clear as it could be. FNS proposes a collaborative effort with the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion to develop an evidence-based literature review on the effectiveness of nutrition education programs in improving nutrition-related knowledge, attitudes and behavior among elementary school-aged children, middle school-aged children, and low-income people participating in SNAP. The project will also include an environmental scan of existing interventions. The goals of this research are to ascertain the most effective designs and tools for conducting classroom- and community-based nutrition education for use in SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs, and to determine the most valid, reliable, and appropriate research methods or designs to assess such programs.

**Putting Behavioral Economics to Work in School Cafeterias:** Even when consumers understand the value of a healthy diet, they do not always make the rationale healthy choices economic theory predicts they should. Choosing what and how much to eat may be controlled more strongly by distinct psychological mechanisms. Examples include personal commitment that supports self-control and mental accounting of how much should be spent on or calories allocated to healthful foods. The associated research from the fields of consumer psychology and social marketing has evolved into behavioral economics. The proposed study – in collaboration with the Economic Research Service and the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion – will consist of demonstrations in which such techniques are used to improving diet quality the food choices students make at school. They might include choosing one’s lunch items in advance of going to the lunchroom or presenting less healthful items in smaller amounts. An impact evaluation will be conducted to assess changes in student behavior.

**Development and Testing of Supporting Content for Core Nutrition Messages:** The FNS Core Nutrition Messages, launched in early 2009, provide research-based, consumer-tested motivational messages for FNS program partners to use in developing nutrition promotion programs for nutrition assistance clients. Interest in and use of the *Dietary Guidelines/MyPyramid*-based messages remains strong. This project will support development and testing of additional supporting content related to core messages for mothers of preschool kids and elementary age kids, designed to motivate and empower low-income mothers and children make healthier food choices. The target audiences are mothers of preschool and elementary age children 8-10 years old.

### ***FNCS Priority: Expand the Farm-Food Connection in FNS Programs***

**Nutrition Assistance in Farmers Markets: Understanding Current Operations:** This study will explore existing practices in using EBT to allow farmers markets to redeem benefits from SNAP and the WIC and Seniors' Farmer's Market Nutrition Programs (WIC FMNP and SFMNP) through a survey of currently-participating markets and a set of case studies that will obtain more detailed information on the characteristics of clients and participating markets, costs and other requirements to set up EBT applications, and volume of program business. The study will also examine a small number of existing projects in which SNAP and WIC participants receive an incentive to encourage purchases at farmer's markets, to understand how the projects operate, the amount and form of the incentive, and lessons learned. Results will help to identify successful models and create technical assistance guidance for broader implementation in SNAP, the fruit and vegetable voucher used as part of the new WIC food packages, and the FMNPs.

### ***FNCS Priority: Continue Modernizing FNS Programs***

**School Program Operations Study:** This project will gather a wide range of descriptive information about the operation of school meals programs at the State and school district levels needed to inform program management and the development of national policies. It will also create a web-based quick-response survey capability that will allow FNS to query program operating agencies on specific descriptive items that require little or no lookup on their part.

**Evaluating the Interview Requirement for SNAP Certification:** Some human service programs, especially in the health care arena, are changing their intake and certification processes to eliminate face-to-face interviews between clients and caseworkers. Views of such a change in the SNAP program are mixed – some consider the interview as an essential component of good customer service that connects people to benefits; others see it as a potential procedural barrier, especially at a time of rising caseloads and reduced staff resources. Evidence of the impact of the interview itself on program access, customer service, and payment accuracy is limited. This project will test alternatives to the existing SNAP certification interview in a small number of sites, and conduct a rigorous evaluation to compare the impacts of these certification procedures on client satisfaction, benefit accuracy, and administrative costs.

**Evaluation of Combined Application for SNAP and Medicare Part D Low-Income Subsidy:**

This study is intended to test the effectiveness of using data from the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services to increase participation in SNAP among elderly Medicare Low-income Subsidy (LIS) beneficiaries. Demonstration projects will consist of targeted outreach, data matching and/or a simplified application process to facilitate SNAP participation. The evaluation will assess impacts on SNAP participation, payment accuracy and cost-neutrality.

**WIC Special Project Grants:** Since 1995, the annual WIC appropriation has provided funding for grants to WIC State agencies to develop, implement, and evaluate new or innovative methods of WIC service delivery to meet the changing needs of participants. Potential topics for 2010 include:

- **Impact of Changes in WIC Food Packages on Participants:** Projects could explore the impact and implications of these benefit changes – the largest since WIC’s inception.
- **WIC Access Improvement:** Grants could focus on the causes of non-participation by eligible families and explore the characteristics of local programs with high rates of child retention.
- **Data Sharing for Improved Access:** Grants could explore potential new opportunities to use WIC data to access other nutrition assistance programs, and to use electronic data from other means-tested programs to simplify WIC eligibility determination and access.

**SUPPORT FOR NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE**

**Measuring Access, Trends and Impacts (Microsimulation):** This ongoing project supports several key analytic tools and analyses to address program participation trends and impacts, generates annual reports on the characteristics, participation rates, and patterns of participation of SNAP recipients, and supports the capability to assess cost and distributional impacts of proposed changes to SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs.

**Special Nutrition Analysis Project:** This project will provide the capacity to conduct a number of quick turnaround analyses and modeling tasks to support policy making and operational management of the Child Nutrition, WIC, and Food Distribution Programs. This capability is needed to support assessment of the cost and impact of CN/WIC reauthorization proposals offered before Congress, analyze program data to assess trends, and provide for routine, ongoing calculation of the nutrient content and retail value of food-based benefit packages, among other tasks.

**Informing Depth of Stock Policy for SNAP Retailers:** This project will analyze data collected as part of SNAP store visit contracts to assess the percent of sales from food vs. nonfood items or perishable vs. nonperishable foods by store type and location. The project will provide valuable context for considering policy alternatives with respect to the stock requirements to participate as an authorized SNAP store.

**Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Tiering Error Measurements:** The Improper Payments Information Act of 2002 (IPIA) requires agencies to produce annual measures of erroneous payments in Federal programs subject to risk. For the CACFP, FNS has met this requirement through studies of errors child care sponsoring organizations make when assigning

family day care home providers to higher or lower reimbursement tiers. This item provides funding for the 2011, 2012, and 2013 measures.

**Measuring Meal Claiming Error in CACFP Family Day Care Homes:** In consultation with OMB, FNS has engaged in a program of research to develop a method to assess erroneous payments due to meal claiming errors in CACFP's family day care home component. A recent project that tested the feasibility, cost, and validity of different methods for validating meal reimbursement claims submitted by family day care homes to their sponsors recommended parent recall surveys for further testing as the method most likely to yield the needed information on improper payments related to meal claiming errors. This project will test that method on a broader scale.

**WIC Participant and Program Characteristics for 2010 (PC-2010):** This project funds the biennial data collection and analysis of WIC participant administrative records. Since 1992, information from this data series has been used to monitor progress on performance measures and to support regulatory impact analyses, program management decisions, testimony to Congress, and public speeches by policy officials. It is also used to fulfill requirements for racial/ethnic reporting.

**WIC-Medicaid Cost-Benefit Study:** The first FNS-sponsored WIC Medicaid Study, published in 1991, found that in 1987-88, every dollar spent on WIC services to low-income pregnant women saved \$1.77 to \$3.13 in Medicaid cost during the first 60 days following delivery. This study will explore the feasibility of 1) replicating this study to update the findings, and 2) extending the exploration of WIC cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness for pregnant women and other categories of WIC participants. An update of a 1995 meta-analysis of savings due to prenatal WIC benefits will also be developed.

**Planning a WIC Research Agenda:** While many key performance-related issues in WIC are worthy of study, an examination of the impact of WIC on outcomes such as nutrition, health and obesity is considerably more complex than in the past due to program expansion, growth in Medicaid coverage, and changes in the population and public health services. This project will commission a conference and series of expert papers to address both key research issues and methodological challenges and solutions. Results of the workshop will help shape future decisions on the use of WIC research funds.

**Food and Nutrition Information Center:** Funds will support the Food and Nutrition Information Center within the National Agricultural Library to systematically store and disseminate information on USDA nutrition assistance programs, nutrition education, and related nutrition topics.