

National- and State-Level Estimates of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Eligibility and WIC Program Reach in 2020 (Summary)

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides supplemental foods, nutrition education, breastfeeding promotion and support, and referrals to health care and social services to low-income, nutritionally at-risk pregnant women, new mothers, infants, and children up to age 5.

This analysis offers national-and-State estimates of the number of people eligible for WIC benefits and the percent of the eligible population participating in 2020, including estimates by participant category. The analysis also provides estimates by region, by U.S. State and territory, and by race and ethnicity. The results are presented graphically, but this release does not include a full report.

Due to improvements in the estimation methodology, this analysis should not be directly compared with estimates from previous WIC eligibility reports.

Key Findings

- The average monthly WIC-eligible population totaled 12.51 million in Calendar Year (CY) 2020.
- In the average month of 2020, WIC served an estimated 50.2 percent of those eligible for WIC.
- The coverage rates for WIC-eligible infants and non-breastfeeding women were highest among WIC participant categories in 2020; coverage rates declined for children as the children aged.
- Coverage rates were highest for Hispanic (64 percent) WIC-eligible individuals.

Methods

Over the past 20 years, the data sources underlying the WIC eligibility estimates have evolved, and the adjustment factors have been enhanced. However, a comprehensive review of the underlying methodologies used to produce the estimates has not been conducted since the 2003 report by the Committee of National Statistics of the National Research Council.¹ Limitations of the existing methodologies and outdated adjustment factors created challenges for reliably estimating the number of individuals eligible for WIC.

When producing the 2020 WIC eligibility estimates, USDA conducted a comprehensive review of the methodology used to produce the WIC eligibility estimates. This included an examination of whether USDA should continue using the Community Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS-ASEC) as the primary data source for the estimates, or whether the American

Community Survey (ACS) should replace the CPS-ASEC as the primary data source.

USDA consulted with external experts to look at a variety of methodologies to determine the one that produced the most consistent estimates over time. The chosen methodology continues to use CPS-ASEC as the primary data source (similar to all estimates produced since the 2003 report by the Committee on National Statistics of the National Research Council), but with extensive methodological improvements. These improvements include pooling two years of ACS data to calculate State-level coverage rates; updating the factors used to adjust the estimates of eligible women for all new methods based on newly released data on fetal deaths and maternal mortality; and updating the alternate weights provided by the U.S. Census Bureau for the 2020 CPS-ASEC and incorporating the new weights for the 2021 CPS-ASEC.

The estimates of program eligibility continue to consider poverty level, adjunctive income eligibility (e.g., due to

¹ Ver Ploeg, M., & Betson, D. M. (Eds.). (2003). *Estimating eligibility and participation for the WIC program: Final report*. The National Academies Press.

participation in the USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)), national estimates of nutritional risk, and national- and State-level estimates of duration of breastfeeding. The estimates of program reach or coverage are derived using the USDA, Food and Nutrition Service’s (FNS) administrative data on the average monthly number of program participants divided by the average monthly number of individuals estimated to be eligible for the program. Standard errors are included to estimate precision.

Due to the changes in methodology, USDA re-estimated the results for 2016-2019 while producing 2020 estimates; estimates presented here should not be directly compared with previously published eligibility estimates.

The 2020 WIC eligibility release does not include a full written report; instead, it is a collection of online graphics with information about the methodology. More detailed results for 2016-2020 estimates are available on the USDA website at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research-analysis>.

Findings

The average monthly WIC-eligible population totaled 12.51 million in Calendar Year (CY) 2020 (Table 1), essentially unchanged from the revised estimate of 12.50 million in 2019.

In the average month of 2020, WIC served an estimated 50.2 percent of those eligible for WIC, a statistically insignificant decrease from the revised estimate for 2019 (50.5 percent). The percentage of the eligible population that receives WIC benefits is the program’s “coverage

The coverage rate for WIC-eligible infants and non-breastfeeding women was highest among WIC participant subgroups in 2020 (82 percent each), while the coverage rate for WIC-eligible children (41 percent) continued to be lower than other groups.

Coverage rates were highest for Hispanic (64 percent) WIC-eligible individuals and lowest for non-Hispanic White WIC-eligible individuals (38 percent). Among pregnant women eligible for WIC, racial and ethnic differences in coverage rates were smaller (54 percent among Hispanic, 49 percent among non-Hispanic Black, and 39 percent among non-Hispanic White WIC-eligible pregnant women).

The relative order of coverage rates by participant category has remained consistent from CY 2005 to CY 2020, despite the re-estimation of the series. Across all years, coverage rates were highest for infants, followed by those for postpartum women and pregnant women. Coverage rates for children were consistently the lowest. The updated estimates for 2016-2020 found that the number of individuals eligible for WIC saw slight annual declines between 2016 and 2020; this also held true for most subgroups examined in the estimates (participant subgroups and racial/ethnic subgroups).

Coverage rates vary substantially by State, as demonstrated by the map below (Figure 1). Confidence intervals around estimates for States with small populations are larger than for other States, so differences between States and across years may be less pronounced than they appear in the map.

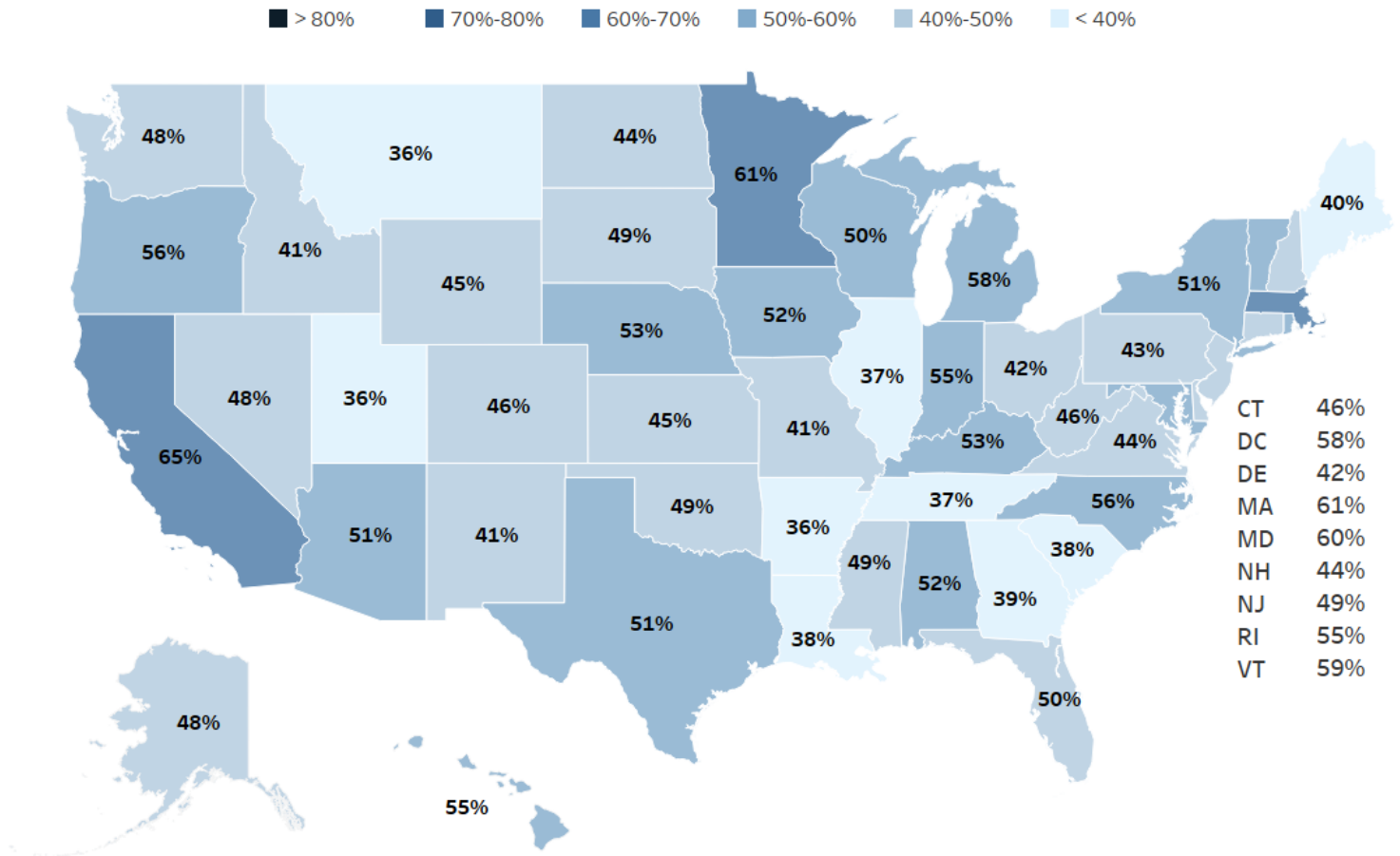
Table 1: WIC¹ Eligibility and Coverage Rate by Participant Category, Calendar Year 2020

WIC Participant Category	Number of Eligible Individuals (Millions)	Percentage of All Eligible Individuals	Number of Participating Individuals (Millions)	Coverage Rate ²
Infants	1.88	15.0%	1.54	81.7%
Total Children	8.17	65.3%	3.32	40.6%
Children Age 1	2.05	16.4%	1.17	56.9%
Children Age 2	2.02	16.1%	0.88	43.9%
Children Age 3	2.07	16.5%	0.78	37.8%
Children Age 4	2.04	16.3%	0.48	23.8%
Pregnant Women	1.12	8.9%	0.51	45.6%
Total Postpartum Women	1.35	10.7%	0.92	68.5%
Breastfeeding Women	0.84	6.7%	0.51	60.4%
Non-breastfeeding Women	0.50	4.0%	0.41	81.9%
All Participants	12.51	100.0%	6.28	50.2%

¹WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

²The coverage rate is the percentage of eligible individuals in the respective participant category that receive WIC benefits.

Figure 1: WIC Coverage Rates for All Participants by State, Calendar Year 2020



WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

For More Information:

Gray K., Kessler C., Rozen J., Bryant A., Griffiths R., and Wakar B. (2022). National- and State-Level Estimates of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Eligibility and WIC Program Reach in 2020 (Online Graphics Only). Prepared by Insight Policy Research, Contract No 12319821F0054. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Grant Lovellette. Available online at www.fns.usda.gov/research-analysis.