

FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN FISCAL YEAR 2025

Please Note: This plan is a forecast of projects FNS expects to pursue in Fiscal Year 2025, but it is subject to modification without notice based on funding availability and program priorities. All listed projects are funded with research appropriations except for program-led projects which are preceded by an asterisk (*). Program-led projects may be completed in-house and not contracted out.

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FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN – FISCAL YEAR 2025

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) conducts various 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 expected to be launched in Fiscal Year (FY) 2025. It reflects decisions by FNS’ program and research staff and leadership on the best use of available research and program funding to meet current information needs aligned with Agency priorities to improve program efficiency and integrity, tackle food and nutrition insecurity, and advance health equity. This plan also aligns with Objectives 3.1 and 3.5 of the [USDA Science and Research Strategy, 2023-2026](#). FNS developed this plan in consultation with the USDA 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 serve on advisory and technical panels for the studies. Projects also include work conducted through partnerships between FNS and USDA’s Economic Research Service (ERS).

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

PROJECTS BY AGENCY PRIORITY TOPIC

STRENGTHEN PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS' ABILITY TO EMBRACE HEALTHY DIETARY HABITS

National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey 2 (FoodAPS-2)

FoodAPS is a nationally representative survey of household food purchases and acquisitions. In partnership with USDA's ERS and the United States Census Bureau of the U.S. Department of Commerce, this project is a continuation of FoodAPS-1, which was conducted from 2012-2013. FoodAPS-2 will provide updated, timely, and relevant information on the changing food environment and consumer food choices. Food purchase and acquisition data will be collected from SNAP, WIC, and non-SNAP/WIC households, as well as information from households with children who receive no cost or reduced-price school breakfast and/or lunch. Current data are lacking about the food purchasing behavior of participants in FNS' food and nutrition assistance programs. Having this information will help inform policy and program changes necessary to ensure that the programs are meeting the needs of participants. Funding was provided in Fiscal Year 2023, and Fiscal Year 2025 funding will continue the work.

Systematic Review of Iron Requirements in Infant Formula

FNS recently published a proposed rule to establish science-based standards for the foods in the WIC food packages. This proposed rule is based on a review by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), which conducts an updated review of the WIC food packages every ten years. In the most recent review, NASEM indicated more research is needed to inform recommendations about the needed iron levels in infant formula requirements in WIC to ensure the formula plays its role in the supplementation of diets to address anemia in WIC-participating infants. This systematic review, which will focus on literature emerging since the last NASEM review, will examine the current state of the scientific literature on the topic and provide valuable evidence for NASEM to use in its next review of the WIC food packages.

WIC Breastfeeding MIS Standards

This project will examine how breastfeeding outcome data are captured in WIC Management Information Systems (MIS) and work toward a set of universal breastfeeding indicators that can be captured across systems.

Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) Nutrition Education Study

Funds have been provided for the FDPIR program to expand its nutrition education efforts. This study would be a descriptive analysis of how FDPIR sites are using the funding, including the types of curricula being used, whether funding is going to additional staffing, and the methods and modalities used (e.g., classroom-based; virtual; Smartphone application). This study will also explore how FDPIR nutrition education may be combined with other nutrition education resources and funding (i.e., through SNAP-Education or Team Nutrition, which supports the Child

Nutrition programs). FNS plans to incorporate an outcomes analysis of participants, examining behavior change outcomes after participating in nutrition education.

WIC Food Package Policy Options Report

This study would continue the series, detailing which WIC food options State agencies provide under the new WIC Food Package Rule, the publication of which is anticipated in the Spring of 2024. FNS will also explore repeating the collection of key food package policy options elected by State agencies on an annual or biannual basis to support tracking of the implementation of the WIC Food Package Rule and changes in State policy option elections over time.

WIC Secondary Epidemiological and Evaluation Data (SEED) Cooperative Agreement

The goal of this project is to initiate and support a rigorous academic research program that will build evidence of WIC's impact and implementation related to program policy priority areas. This project will provide a platform for USDA to continue working with the broader academic community to conduct policy- and program-relevant research focused on the impact of WIC. The cooperative agreement will provide funds to establish a coordinating center that will provide subgrants, technical assistance, and evaluation support for small scale academic subgrantees focused on using available WIC data products and building novel data sets that will be made available to the broader academic research community. This project will broaden the network and diversity of academic partners working to expand our understanding of the impact of WIC and will promote the availability of robust USDA data sets.

Approaches to Improve Breastfeeding Equity through WIC

This study will take findings from WIC Breastfeeding Policy Inventory II (BPI II) and feedback from the WIC Breastfeeding Support Campaign to identify and consider best practices for reducing disparities in breastfeeding initiation and duration across different racial and ethnic groups.

Evaluation of Selected SNAP Nutrition Education (SNAP-Ed) Interventions

States may choose from among many interventions in the SNAP-Ed Toolkit as well as other evidence-based interventions and deliver nutrition education and obesity prevention services through a combination of educational approaches. However, clear evidence on the effectiveness of SNAP-Ed is lacking. For this study, States will be invited to submit projects for the evaluation. The study will select and evaluate four promising projects that combine direct nutrition education with comprehensive multi-level interventions or community and public health approaches to improve nutrition and obesity prevention. Results will provide models for both implementation and evaluation of nutrition education interventions and contribute to the SNAP-Ed evidence base.

Farm to School Census and Research Activities

The quadrennial Farm to School Census (Census) collects and synthesizes data to better understand the characteristics of School Food Authorities (SFAs) engaged in farm to school and the scope and details of the activities they pursue (e.g., local food procurement, gardening,

agriculture education). The Census is distributed to all public and private SFAs (including residential childcare institutions) participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) in the 50 States, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Washington, D.C. Fiscal Year 2025 funding will support additional Farm to School research activities, including the biennial Farm to School Grant Evaluation as well as planning for the Fiscal Year 2027 Farm to School Census.

***Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) Healthy Eating Index (HEI) Study**

FNS plans to assess the nutritional quality of the FDPIR food package using the HEI-2020 once the multi-phase food package enhancements are complete. The foods offered in the monthly FDPIR food package help to ensure participating households maintain a healthy and balanced diet. Findings from this study will help FNS understand if foods offered in the FDPIR food package adhere to Dietary Guidelines recommendations and may be used to inform future offerings in the food packages to meet dietary recommendations.

***USDA Foods Available List Feedback Analysis**

FNS plans to establish a routine method of collecting and analyzing feedback from program stakeholders on the foods that should be made available in The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and USDA Foods in Schools and analyze feedback to inform the types of foods made available in TEFAP and USDA Foods in Schools.

***Continuous Evidence Monitoring Related to the Dietary Guidelines**

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans are mandated to reflect the preponderance of current scientific and medical knowledge and to be published by USDA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) at least every five years. USDA and HHS convene a Federal advisory committee to provide evidence-based advice to the Departments for each edition of the Dietary Guidelines. Because the review of evidence is time-consuming and resource-intensive—and the scope of the Dietary Guidelines is broad—FNS, through the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP), conducts interim systematic review work between Dietary Guidelines cycles. This interim work includes monitoring for new evidence on existing systematic review questions and conducting new systematic reviews. Continuous evidence monitoring is a best practice in systematic reviews and was recommended by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

ENSURE EQUITABLE AND CONSISTENT ACCESS TO FNS PROGRAMS FOR ELIGIBLE POPULATIONS

WIC Infant Toddler Feeding Practices in ITOs and Territories

The WIC Infant Toddler Feeding Practices/WIC Health Outcomes and Participant Experiences (WIC HOPE) study series provides valuable insight into how WIC participants utilize the food packages and nutrition education they receive through the WIC program. This effort will add a

sub-analysis to the current WIC HOPE study, looking specifically at the unique experiences of WIC participants served in areas in which the program is administered by Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) and WIC participants who reside in the U.S. Territories. It will build upon information gathered through the Fiscal Year 2024 WIC ITOs and territories study which seeks to understand the unique experiences of ITOs and territories in operating the WIC program.

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) Provider Study

FNS plans to conduct a formal research study of TEFAP States and eligible recipient agencies (ERAs). This study will include a census survey with follow-up conversations to assess topics such as:

- Access: Identify barriers to TEFAP participation, including requirements guided by policy (e.g., income eligibility) and those unique to the local level (e.g., transportation, weather, other food sources).
- Program coverage: Number and type of local agencies providing TEFAP by ZIP code and a comparison of TEFAP participation versus overall food bank participation by total programs and individuals to identify underserved areas and drive innovations in program delivery.
- Service models: Collect data from ERAs and examine the variation in program implementation at the local level (e.g., mobile delivery, client choice programs, days/hours of operation, program outreach).

Part of this study will include developing a mechanism to routinely collect basic information from States and food banks about the acceptability of foods received through TEFAP. FNS needs more “in the moment” information, particularly related to the acceptability of new options, including bonus foods provided through TEFAP. Providing a formal avenue to collect and apply stakeholder feedback to program operations will help to improve customer service.

FNS Program Agency Location Analysis

FNS seeks to provide participants with equitable access to all its programs. The ongoing WIC Vendor Access study will be creating a spatial analysis of WIC participants and vendors and developing recommendations and tools State agencies can use when defining participant access to vendors. In Fiscal Year 2024, FNS added CSFP to the Vendor Access Study. With funding in Fiscal Year 2025, FNS will extend this analysis to include TEFAP and potentially FDPIR sites as well. This would allow FNS to create a map of TEFAP ERA distribution sites and analyze access to the program in remote, rural, Tribal, and/or low-income areas as well as compare TEFAP distribution site locations with locations of other FNS program service sites or participating vendors (e.g., SNAP retail food stores, WIC clinics, CSFP distribution sites, and FDPIR distribution sites).

Use of Preliminary WIC PC+ Data to Address Long-Standing Questions About WIC Utilization

The WIC Program Characteristics (PC+) dataset will include the traditional Minimum Data Set (MDS) files but will add two years of longitudinal Management Information System (MIS) data and EBT data. The new dataset should allow for extensive analyses related to use of the WIC

food packages, including which products participants redeem, which are under-redeemed, the rate of redemptions by food package type, the level of benefit tailoring, and other in-depth analyses related to WIC participation and benefit use. As FNS receives the updated datasets over time, the Agency will identify further analyses that will help us and our partners better understand the full picture of WIC program utilization.

WIC Eligibility and Coverage Estimates

This project, the latest in a series, will develop a set of national and State-level estimates of the number of individuals eligible for WIC benefits and the percent of eligible individuals participating in WIC. 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, infants, and children and examines regional, racial, and ethnic differences in coverage to inform the WIC program's actions to ensure equity. Results are used in the budget process to support program management and to address program performance.

Inventory of SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) Providers

This study seeks to create a comprehensive inventory of SNAP E&T providers and their locations in all States. This inventory will be used to create a map of SNAP E&T providers and locations to enable E&T participants to find services and to help FNS and States identify gaps in coverage. The study will also create a tool for States to update annually to keep the inventory of providers up to date.

Evaluation of SNAP Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) Modernization

This study will evaluate the impact of SNAP EBT modernization – such as online purchasing and mobile payment – on a range of nationwide indicators of program performance, including access, equity, and cost. This study will help FNS understand the national impact of SNAP EBT modernization and identify successes with and existing barriers to EBT modernization.

Support for Assessment of SNAP Demonstration Projects

SNAP State agencies often seek statutory waivers (i.e., demonstration projects) to test program changes that might increase the efficiency of SNAP or improve benefit delivery to eligible households. Any program change allowed through a demonstration project must be evaluated to determine effectiveness and cost impacts. This funding will award task orders through an existing Blanket Purchase Agreement to help provide support for evaluating demonstration project waivers through administrative data analysis, small scale data collection, and interviews with State agency staff or SNAP participants.

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.

School Meals for All – Evidence from Ongoing Research

Implementation of universal free school meal policies in several States presents a unique opportunity to add to the evidence base regarding the impact such policies can have on States, schools, and School Food Authorities, as well as school-age children and their families. Given the scope of ongoing and planned USDA research related to school meals, many key research questions can be answered through analysis of data collected from existing studies. Funding this fiscal year will support additional identified analysis projects and/or dissemination activities.

IMPROVE RESULTS AND THE CONSUMER EXPERIENCE THROUGH A CULTURE OF INNOVATION, PROCESS ANALYSIS, AND IMPROVEMENT

Quick Response Surveys for Child Nutrition Programs, SNAP, and WIC

In addition to its large-scale evaluations, FNS has built the capacity to field single-topic studies with shorter timeframes to respond to current policy and program needs. Surveys conducted under this project will answer questions that cannot be addressed through available administrative data and will enable FNS to respond quickly and effectively to requests for policy-relevant analyses and reporting and ensure FNS has multiple avenues available to support its practice of evidence-based decision making. Recent survey topics include surveys of two understudied groups of CACFP providers: Adult Day Care Centers and Emergency Shelters. Both surveys will collect data on characteristics of providers, services they offer, and perceived barriers to CACFP participation.

Understanding Demographics, Culture, Needs, and Opportunities of U.S. Territories

FNS is committed to meeting the needs of U.S. nationals and citizens residing in the U.S. territories. To that end, FNS will convene a study with the aim to better understand the demographics and cultures of the territories, needs, and opportunities as they relate to FNS' food assistance programs. Understanding the unique needs of the territories will provide FNS with information to inform future program direction to ensure the needs of U.S. nationals and citizens in the territories are met.

Evaluation of Subsidized Work-Based Learning in SNAP Employment and Training

Potential legislative changes exempting income earned through subsidized work-based learning in the SNAP eligibility determination could increase the number of opportunities for SNAP E&T participants to gain work experience through this type of training. This would enable SNAP participants to focus on training and improving their skills without having to forgo earnings during training; this is a deterrent from seeking E&T services for many people. This study seeks to conduct a rigorous evaluation of three to five SNAP E&T providers that offer subsidized work-based learning to understand longer-term impacts on participant employment and earnings outcomes after program completion. Findings from this study may also be informative to SNAP E&T more generally.

Best Practices in SNAP Employment and Training Programs

The Agricultural Act of 2014 (Public Law 113-79) requires a review every five years of existing programs and research to identify best practices in SNAP E&T program components. This is the second review that will identify program components and practices that effectively assist SNAP participants in gaining skills, training, work, or experience that will increase their ability to obtain regular employment and identify which components are best integrated with statewide workforce development systems. It will also include best practices and promising strategies on increasing program participation among individuals referred to SNAP E&T programs. This review will focus on literature published from 2021 to 2025.

Understanding the Rates, Causes, and Costs of SNAP Churning

To varying degrees, all States experience churning in the SNAP caseload, the phenomenon in which participating households leave the program at recertification (or some other point) and then return within a short time. FNS conducted a study using Fiscal Year 2011 administrative data that found rates of churning between 17 to 28 percent across six States with annual costs between \$2 million and \$108 million. This study, which will follow a similar methodology as the 2011 study, seeks to update the estimates for churning in light of changes in State SNAP certification and application processing options since 2011, such as increased use of telephone interviews, online document and application submission, and expanded use of simplified reporting systems.

Child Nutrition (CN) Pulse Studies – Special Topics in Child Nutrition

Fiscal Year 2025 funding will support additional iterations of this study series, which may include short surveys of School Food Authorities (SFAs), Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) sponsors, Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) operators, State agencies, and Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) designed to collect timely information on topics of immediate and/or ongoing interest or emerging concern. Modeled after the Census Household Pulse Survey initiated by the United States Census Bureau during the COVID-19 pandemic, this effort will collect information from Child Nutrition program operators to examine policy-relevant information under a quick turnaround timeframe. Surveys may be repeated to allow for monitoring of impacts – and the effects of mitigating strategies – over time. FNS has conducted similar surveys in the past two years to monitor impacts of supply chain disruptions on School Food Authorities.

Child Nutrition Analytics and Modeling

Fiscal Year 2025 funds will provide continued financial support for statistical analyses, modeling, and visual presentation of existing data to respond to legislative, budget, and policy questions critical to the Child Nutrition programs and to evaluate policy changes. Existing data sources include the FNS National Data Bank, FNS studies, and large national studies and surveys.

ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY TO STAKEHOLDERS THROUGH INTEGRITY, TRANSPARENCY, MONITORING, AND REPORTING

WIC Analysis and Modeling

Fiscal Year 2025 funding will provide financial support for a variety of analyses conducted to respond to legislative, budget, and policy questions critical to WIC. The funding may support additional analyses using existing data from large nationally representative studies.

Rethinking National Survey of WIC Participants (NSWP) and How Certification Error is Calculated in WIC

For this project, FNS plans to engage subject matter experts to develop a new methodology for meeting the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Act (IPERA) and OMB Improper Payment (IP) requirements related to certification error in WIC.

WIC Program Operations Study

WIC State agencies receive grants from FNS in the form of food grants and Nutrition Services and Administration (NSA) grants. NSA grants cover program operations and administration of WIC services including nutrition education, breastfeeding promotion and support, client services, and program management. This study would collect data on how WIC State agencies operationalize NSA funds, including if they supplement NSA funding with additional State or local resources and grants, and how these amounts compare to their funding levels. This study will also explore whether different models of WIC service delivery (e.g., health department, non-profit, hospital/healthcare system, social service agency) pose certain facilitators or barriers in program operations, service delivery, and funding and cost expenditure.

Assess SNAP Stolen Benefit Replacement Policies

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (Public Law 117-328) requires States to replace stolen SNAP benefits through skimming and included provisions related to fraud prevention. The law requires the Secretary to provide guidance to States around effective security measures and requires Secretary approval of State plans for replacement of stolen benefits. Additionally, FNS issued guidance to States recommending best practices adopted by the commercial sector to combat stolen benefit fraud scams. This study will assess how States exercised their discretion and how those choices impacted SNAP households among three factors: timely access to benefits replacement, equitable access to benefits replacement, and the impact of adopted fraud prevention strategies.

Evaluation of the Use of Third-Party Income Databases in SNAP

In recent years, most State agencies have independently contracted with commercial vendors to obtain automated verification of individuals' employment and income status via a third-party income database (TPID) of employer-reported payroll data. FNS is also offering State agencies expanded access to TPID through its national contract to achieve economy of scale and lower

contracting costs across all SNAP State agencies. This evaluation will assess the extent to which TPID reveals undeclared income at certification or recertification, relative costs savings achieved from national TPID implementation (if any), and correlative factors related to undeclared income, including the effect of casework interviews in eliciting relevant income declarations. Data will come from a selection of States from each region, with a sample of SNAP households pulled from administrative data matched against TPID search records.

Approaches for Improving the Collection of Race and Ethnicity Data on SNAP Participants

All States ask applicants about the race and ethnicity of household members on the SNAP application, but responding to these questions is voluntary as these data are not required to determine program eligibility. SNAP administrative data are typically missing the race and ethnicity of about 20 percent of participants – however, the rate of missing data varies considerably by State. This study seeks to understand why State agencies have such differing rates of missing data by examining wording and placement of these questions on State SNAP applications and talking with State agency staff. Additionally, the study would propose alternative ways to collect or estimate the missing racial and ethnicity data.

School Nutrition and Meal Cost and School Food Purchase Study

This study includes data collection on a wide variety of topics. The School Nutrition and Meal Cost components will examine the nutritional content and quality of the meals offered and purchased at school, plate waste, the school nutrition environment, school food service operations, cost to produce school meals, as well as student participation, characteristics, satisfaction, and attitudes toward the school lunch and breakfast programs. The School Food Purchase components will provide national estimates of the type, quantity, dollar value and unit price of food acquisitions as well as overall changes in the composition of the entire school food market basket including food purchases for a la carte sales and the relative importance of donated USDA Foods. The study will also examine relationships between district characteristics, purchasing practices, and food costs. Key outcomes across all study components will be presented at both the national level and for subgroups of interest, such as schools and School Food Authorities in States with policies providing free meals to all students or schools participating in the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. Finally, the combined study will develop estimates of the cost of school meals for the outlying areas of Alaska, Hawaii, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Funding this fiscal year will support data analysis and/or dissemination of study findings.

Summer Meals Research and Analysis

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (Public Law 117-328) included authority for a permanent, non-congregate meal service through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) Seamless Summer Option (SSO) for rural areas with no congregate meal service. In addition, the Act authorized a permanent, nationwide summer EBT program for low-income children. These programmatic changes present both an opportunity and a need for new research examining a variety of topics such as program implementation and program integrity, as well as a broader assessment of how these new options work together with existing summer meals programs to improve nutrition and reduce food insecurity among

children during summer months. This study provides a flexible contract vehicle for examining research questions related to these new programs in a timely manner. Funds this fiscal year will support a comprehensive, nationally representative assessment of how these new options work together with existing summer meals programs to improve nutrition and reduce food insecurity among children during summer months.

School Meals Operations

FNS conducts an annual study 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 special 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. Funding this fiscal year will support data collection and analysis.

Access, Participation, Eligibility, and Certification (APEC) Study IV

The APEC Study Series provides FNS with reliable, national estimates of improper payments made to school districts in which the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) are operated. Both programs are complex, with risk of improper payments present at multiple stages in the certification, meal claiming, and aggregation processes. Funding this fiscal year will support additional analysis as needed.

Erroneous Payments in Child Care Centers Study-2 (EPICCS-2)

The Erroneous Payments in Child Care Centers Study (EPICCS) generated the first nationally representative estimates of improper payments in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Fiscal Year 2025 funding will support a new study that will build upon the methods developed in the first EPICCS study and follow-on analyses to (1) provide FNS with a reliable measure to estimate erroneous payments in the childcare center component of the CACFP, and (2) use estimation models to update erroneous payment estimates annually.