



Food and Nutrition Service

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

# USDA Food and Nutrition Service Learning Agenda

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# Table of Contents

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I.	Introduction	1
II.	Learning Agenda Questions by Agency Priority	2
A.	Agency Priority: Strengthen program participants’ ability to embrace healthy dietary habits. ....	2
	Learning Agenda Questions 1 Through 3	2
	Background for Questions 1 Through 3	2
B.	Agency Priority: Ensure equitable and consistent access to FNS programs for eligible populations.	4
	Learning Agenda Questions 4 Through 7	4
	Background for Questions 4 Through 7	4
C.	Agency Priority: Improve results and the consumer experience through a culture of innovation, process analysis, and improvement.....	5
	Learning Agenda Questions 8 Through 10	5
	Background for Questions 8 Through 10	6
D.	Agency Priority: Ensure accountability to partners through integrity, transparency, monitoring, and reporting.....	8
	Learning Agenda Question 11	8
	Background for Question 11	8
III.	Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies	9

# I. Introduction

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The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), works to end hunger and obesity through the administration of 16 Federal nutrition assistance programs including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); the Child Nutrition Programs (CNPs); and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). Additionally, the FNS Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP) works to improve the health and well-being of Americans by developing and promoting dietary guidance that links scientific research to the nutrition needs of consumers. These *Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs)* form the basis of Federal nutrition policy and programs. In partnership with State and Tribal governments, FNS's mission is to increase food and nutrition security and reduce hunger by providing children and people with limited resources access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education in a way that supports American agriculture and inspires public confidence.

FNS is committed to ensuring its research and evaluation activities support the agency's mission and move the agency forward in achieving its strategic priorities. In April 2023, FNS published its first Learning Agenda. This document provides an update to reflect changes to existing questions and to present new learning questions. FNS has developed this learning agenda to articulate priority questions which will be addressed through research, evaluation, and analysis activities.

Learning agendas,<sup>1</sup> or evidence-building plans, are a systematic means for identifying and addressing priority questions relevant to the agency's programs, policies, and regulations. Learning agendas identify, prioritize, and establish strategies to develop evidence to answer important short- and long-term questions. The FNS Learning Agenda is intended to be a dynamic and evolving document that is transparent to internal and external audiences and is tailored to meet the FNS's needs and supports USDA's priorities around advancing racial justice, equity, opportunity and rural prosperity, and tackling food and nutrition insecurity. Represented in this Learning Agenda is FNS's commitment to equity and desire to understand what disparities exist in the delivery of its programs and services so that those disparities can be eliminated.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Office of Management and Budget, and U.S. General Services Administration. Evaluation.gov: Learning Agenda. Available at: <https://www.evaluation.gov/evidence-plans/learning-agenda/>. Accessed on October 12, 2022.

## II. Learning Agenda Questions by Agency Priority

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The FNS Learning Agenda consists of 11 questions which are aligned with FNS's strategic priorities. This section presents each of the strategic priorities, their associated learning agenda question(s), and background on the question(s). These learning agenda questions were developed with input from leaders and staff across FNS.

### A. Agency Priority: Strengthen program participants' ability to embrace healthy dietary habits.

#### Learning Agenda Questions 1 Through 3

##### Learning Agenda Question 1

What strategies most effectively communicate messages that reflect the latest nutrition science, incorporate healthier foods, promote the use of culturally relevant foods, and reach diverse populations to help reduce racial inequities and mitigate diet-related health disparities?

##### Learning Agenda Question 2

To what extent do FNS nutrition assistance programs and policies assist individuals, families, and communities with adhering to science-based nutrition recommendations?

##### Learning Agenda Question 3

How successfully do FNS nutrition assistance programs provide meaningful support and contribute to nutrition security throughout all life stages?

#### Background for Questions 1 Through 3

The first three priority questions aim to build evidence that will ultimately assist program participants with embracing a healthy diet. Collectively, the questions target program participants of all ages and life cycle groups, and these questions are intended to aid the Agency in evaluating its efforts to improve access to a healthful diet, whether it be through nutrition education and messaging, program participation, and/or other nutrition-related supports.

Given the scopes of these questions closely align with the FNS mission, many projects related to these priority questions are already underway. Additionally, new projects will continue to be initiated and each research project will have its own timeline for completion and timely dissemination of results.

FNS initiated several studies that assess the impact of the increase in SNAP benefits due to pandemic funding and the 2021 Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) reevaluation on SNAP participants' shopping patterns, purchases, and alignment with dietary guidance. FNS also began a study to assess the feasibility of purchasing food from retailers to prepare healthy meals that meet the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025*, on a budget consistent with the TFP. In addition, FNS launched a campaign to make MyPlate a household name in an effort to help the public move towards healthier eating patterns. FNS will conduct a study comparing the food purchase of SNAP and non-SNAP households, understanding benefit redemption patterns in SNAP, and using WIC EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) data to understand food purchases and preferences. Information from these and similar studies will support inquiries from partners, including Congress, and program and policy development.

FNS initiated the National School Foods Study (NSFS)—a comprehensive assessment of the nutritional quality of school meals, costs to produce those meals, and the amounts, sources, and costs of foods schools purchase for their school meal programs. Among other things, the NSFS will determine the food and nutrient content of school meals and afterschool snacks and the overall nutritional quality of these meals.

In the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, Congress created a new permanent summer program (Summer EBT) as well as new options for non-congregate summer meal service. In December 2023, FNS published the interim final rule, enabling States and Tribes to implement the Summer EBT program and summer meal service options in 2024. FNS has already begun and will continue to implement several research projects with the aim to monitor and evaluate these programmatic changes as well as conduct a broader assessment of how they work together with existing summer meals programs to improve nutrition security.

## **B. Agency Priority: Ensure equitable and consistent access to FNS programs for eligible populations.**

### **Learning Agenda Questions 4 Through 7**

#### **Learning Agenda Question 4**

The COVID-19 pandemic presented opportunities to deliver benefits in different ways. As some of those changes have become reality, what can we learn about those procedures as part of normal operations?

#### **Learning Agenda Question 5**

What are the racial/ethnic, socio-economic, and geographic disparities in FNS program access and delivery, and what factors are associated with, or may impact, identified disparities?

#### **Learning Agenda Question 6**

How can FNS better support FNS nutrition assistance program operators and program participants to help reduce racial/ethnic and other identified inequities in health and nutrition-related outcomes?

#### **Learning Agenda Question 7**

What gaps and barriers in access and participation in FNS nutrition assistance programs need to be addressed to better reach underserved populations?

### **Background for Questions 4 Through 7**

Questions 4 through 7 aim to identify gaps in access to FNS programs among those who are eligible to participate. These questions will specifically explore whether access is both equitable and consistent by identifying factors which may contribute to racial/ethnic, socio-economic, and geographic disparities in FNS program access. These factors will be identified through studies that look at gaps and barriers, and opportunities for increasing access to and participation in FNS programs.

FNS initiated a study to identify data sources to assess whether racial or other disparities exist in the administration of work requirements or employment and training services in SNAP. Another study

seeks to understand how SNAP State agencies have made permanent operational changes since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and how they have built upon the innovation initiated by the pandemic to generate best practices. To further understand whether programs are meeting the needs of participants and how to improve participation, FNS is conducting studies of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). There has been a decrease in participation in FDPIR, and the CSFP does not meet all eligible communities or seniors; information from these studies may help inform program or policy changes aimed at increasing participation and ensuring that the programs meet the needs of its participants.

FNS began a longitudinal study of SNAP households to understand food security, food purchases, dietary intakes, and awareness and utilization of SNAP-Education and SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) over time. This study will provide FNS with much needed information about SNAP participants that can be used to inform policy and program changes. To further understand how WIC supports improvements in maternal morbidity and mortality, FNS began two studies that will (1) examine the relationship between WIC participation and health risks associated with maternal mortality and (2) evaluate subgrants administered to WIC State and local agencies that focus on assisting WIC clinic staff with recognizing warning signs for maternal morbidity and mortality.

## **C. Agency Priority: Improve results and the consumer experience through a culture of innovation, process analysis, and improvement.**

### **Learning Agenda Questions 8 Through 10**

#### **Learning Agenda Question 8**

How can FNS support a culture of innovation among state and local operators to improve participants' experience when accessing program benefits and consumer-oriented nutrition education and promotion materials?

#### **Learning Agenda Question 9**

As FNS prepares for the next reevaluation of the TFP and updates to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, what data and information are needed to help ensure these updates are based on the latest science and evidence?



## Learning Agenda Question 10

What supports are needed to enable Tribal self-governance in FNS's nutrition assistance programs?

### Background for Questions 8 Through 10

Questions 8 through 10 focus on FNS's commitment to innovation, process analysis, and improvement. Question 8 focuses on innovation of state and local operators, Question 9 focuses on innovation and improvement as it relates to future reevaluations of the TFP and updates to the DGAs, and Question 10 focuses on Tribal self-governance.

Question 8 focuses on innovation to improve the experience of participants in FNS's programs. FNS can support State and local operators to enhance the participant's experience. Innovation is a key driving element to ensure that participant experience improves, and this can be accomplished in a variety of ways such as modernization of program delivery and innovative and effective use of technology. This agency priority aligns with the Executive Order<sup>2</sup> calling to transform the Federal customer experience. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many States initiated innovative approaches in their FNS program delivery. Some areas where the agency plans to emphasize include, but are not limited to, online purchasing and modernizing benefit issuance. For purposes of this Learning Agenda question, the participant experience could be measured through program evaluations, data analyses, and policy analyses.

FNS initiated a study to improve coordination between SNAP and Medicaid State agencies. By conducting case studies in a few States, the study will identify challenges with improving program coordination and highlight the best practices that could be shared with other states. Another study will identify how a selection of States measure good customer service within SNAP delivery and develop best practices to be shared with all State Agencies. FNS is also initiating a study to describe the implementation experience with the new Summer EBT program in areas—including Tribal areas—that are operating the program during summer 2026.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/12/13/executive-order-on-transforming-federal-customer-experience-and-service-delivery-to-rebuild-trust-in-government/>

Question 9 focuses on continuous quality advancement for the next and future reevaluations of the TFP and updates to the DGAs through innovation and improvement. The TFP provides the cost of a healthy diet on a budget and is used as the basis for maximum SNAP household benefits. FNS is committed to identifying data and information needs to inform the next reevaluation of the TFP and ensure that the inputs into the mathematical model reflect the latest science and evidence. To accomplish this, FNS initiated a multi-faceted research plan to address data and information needs for the next reevaluation. A systematic review of the literature related to the cost of household food loss/waste will help FNS understand the economic implications of household food loss/waste. Other data needs that are addressed in the research plan include analyses to examine the contribution of online food and beverage transactions in the food price data, assumptions about physical activity and body weight when estimating energy requirements, approaches to determining higher and lower price food and beverage modeling categories, how best to reflect current consumption patterns and diverse dietary preferences, and methods for accounting for combined food item/ingredients used in preparing meals. The current methodology for reevaluating the TFP uses an optimization model that selects quantities of foods and beverages in different categories to represent a nutritious diet and subjects the entire selection to a set of constraints, including dietary needs, consumption patterns, calories, and food prices. The research plan addresses improvements to the data integrated in the TFP calculations.

Recent efforts to encourage more Indian and Tribal Organizations (ITOs) to administer nutrition assistance programs led to the addition of Question 10. Currently, SNAP is administered at the state level and some ITOs administer WIC. FNS has or will initiate several studies looking at existing Tribal administration of food assistance programs, including FDPIR and WIC, which will provide FNS with information about strengths, barriers, and challenges to Tribal administration. In addition, FNS will investigate different models to facilitate Tribal administration of SNAP and, as a result Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 funding for up to 10 pilot projects, for child nutrition programs, including school lunch and summer food service.

## **D. Agency Priority: Ensure accountability to partners through integrity, transparency, monitoring, and reporting.**

### **Learning Agenda Question 11**

#### **Learning Agenda Question 11**

How can FNS assist State and local agencies and program operators to further improve integrity, accountability, and customer service when administering nutrition assistance programs?

### **Background for Question 11**

As a Federal agency, FNS is committed to ensuring all operations are undertaken with integrity and transparency, and to monitoring and reporting metrics that demonstrate this commitment. To this end, Question 11 focuses on eliciting strategies that will enable FNS to effectively support program operators at the state and local levels with further improving program integrity and accountability, as well as concurrently enhancing the customer experience.

To address this question and to build evidence for future policy-making decisions, FNS will conduct foundational fact-finding, program evaluations, and data and policy analyses focused on topics such as improper payments and certification error, program operations monitoring, program operator, and participant perceptions and experiences. FNS has an ongoing study titled “The Access, Participation, Eligibility, and Certification (APEC) IV Study,” which examines improper payment rates in the school meals programs, and the “WIC Certification Error Estimates project,” which assesses WIC certification errors to inform program adjustments aimed at reducing errors. FNS also initiated a study to establish the key characteristics of good customer service in SNAP State agencies and develop best practices to be shared with all State agencies.

To support learning and program integrity efforts, FNS will collect data as States and Tribes implement the new summer program and options authorized by the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023. This data will be used to monitor program performance and to support FNS efforts to assist States in implementing the new summer program and options. FNS will also conduct a series of research and evaluation projects in SNAP around stolen benefits and payment accuracy. In addition, FNS will conduct an evaluation to assess State agencies’ use of a national income verification service. As SNAP

undergoes significant program changes as a result of the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023, efforts from these projects will inform FNS's efforts to support States in implementing SNAP.

### III. Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

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Addressing the learning agenda questions and implementing associated projects from the FNS R&E Plan require time, coordination, and other resources that may present challenges. Below are some of the anticipated challenges that the Agency may experience and potential mitigation strategies to address the respective challenges.

*Paperwork Reduction Act-related delays:* The Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) clearance process presents challenges to FNS in gathering, building, and using evidence that is responsive to pressing policy-decisions, especially in times of changing social and economic conditions. The review process can often add more than 12 months to the start-up process for a study. These delays are costly and delay the generation of evidence for policymaking decisions. To mitigate this, FNS is working on a new generic information clearance request with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) that would provide a path for quicker approvals of data collections targeting program operators. In addition, another mitigation strategy would be collaborating on a Departmental-wide process-improvement endeavor in partnership with OMB to examine where the primary delays occur and use that information to develop a tool that facilitates and streamlines the preparation of the information clearance request (ICR) package to reduce common errors.

*Contracting-related guidance:* Because a large portion of evaluation efforts engage outside contractors, they are often hindered by contracting processes that are not tailored to the specific needs of program evaluation. Strategies to continue to build the competency and capacity of acquisition professionals to address the complexity of research contracting needs include the following:

- Continuing to leverage an interagency agreement with the Department of the Interior Acquisitions Services Directorate to assist with contract management;
- Developing research acquisition knowledge assessment questions that might be considered as part of the occupational questionnaire when vacancies occur; and
- Identifying training courses as part of the required annual professional development of contracting specialists.