

FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN  
FISCAL YEAR 2024

**Please Note:** This plan is a forecast of projects FNS expects to pursue in FY 2024, but it is subject to modification without notice based on funding availability and program priorities.

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# FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN – FISCAL YEAR 2024

## 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 FY 2024. It reflects decisions by FNS’ program and research staff and leadership on the best use of available research funding to meet current information needs aligned with Agency priorities to improve program efficiency, integrity, and nutrition. 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

#### **Developing Thrifty Food Plans for U.S. Territories and the Non-Contiguous States**

The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) is a basket of foods and beverages representing a nutritious, practical, cost-effective diet prepared at home. As directed by Congress in the 2018 Farm Bill, USDA reevaluated the Thrifty Food Plan in 2021 to reflect updated data on food prices, food composition, and consumption patterns, and current dietary guidance and published cost adjustments to reflect food prices in Alaska and Hawaii in 2023. As a next step, FNS intends to reevaluate the content or reestimate the cost of the TFP in U.S. territories. USDA established TFPs for Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands in the 1970s and updates the costs annually to reflect inflation but has not reevaluated the contents since establishment of those TFPs. Puerto Rico had a TFP before 1982, when it was part of the Food Stamp Program, but the TFP was discontinued upon establishing Puerto Rico's Nutrition Assistance Program. To date, FNS has not established TFPs for American Samoa or the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands which each receive an annual block grant from FNS for nutrition assistance. This study would develop and execute a methodology to define nutritious, practical, cost-effective diets prepared at home in the U.S. territories and the non-contiguous States of Alaska and Hawaii, including collecting food price data to measure the costs.

#### **Convenience and Variety of Foods and Beverages in the Thrifty Food Plan Market Baskets**

Two aims of USDA's 2021 reevaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) were (1) including convenient forms of commonly consumed foods and beverages in the market basket and (2) creating market baskets that contain a variety of commonly consumed foods and beverages. Per an amendment to Section 3(u) of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 enacted by Congress through Section 4002 of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 ("2018 Farm Bill"), USDA must reevaluate the TFP every five years, with the next reevaluation anticipated in 2026. To quantify these two aims in the [2026 reevaluation of the TFP](#), this study will develop definitions, metrics, and methodologies for measuring the convenience and variety of the TFP Market Basket including: (1) definition(s) of convenience of foods and beverages specifically applicable to the TFP, (2) quantifiable measure(s) of convenience of each of the individual foods and beverages underlying the TFP Market Basket, (3) a methodology for calculating aggregate measures of the convenience of the TFP Market Basket, (4) definition(s) of food and beverage variety specifically applicable to the TFP, and (5) quantifiable measures of variety in the TFP Market Basket.

#### **Classifying and Measuring Household Food Waste**

The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) incorporates a 5-percent food waste factor consisting of two components: spoilage and plate waste. This food waste factor is based on research done in the early 1980s. This study will support potential updates to the TFP food waste factor by developing

and executing a methodology to classify and measure different types of household food waste, including by food category.

### **Linking Food Price Data and Nutrient Databases**

The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) reflects current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance. In FY 2024, FNS will support USDA's acquisition of data that enables the estimation of current food prices. These data will feed into updating the TFP as well as the development of tools to enable the linking of these data and the USDA nutrient databases.

### **Feasibility of Calculating Updated Economies of Scale Factors for Food Costs**

The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) uses economies of scale factors to adjust the value for different household sizes. These adjustment factors reflect households with more members being able to purchase food in larger sized containers at a lower per unit cost, as well as there likely being less food waste in households with more members. The economies of scale adjustment factors presently applied to the TFP are based on a 1985 study. This study will assess the feasibility of calculating updated economies of scale adjustment factors by household size, including the development of an appropriate methodology, the evaluation of existing data sources, and an assessment of the need for new data collection.

### **Farm to School Census and Research Activities**

The 2023 Farm to School Census (Census) will collect and synthesize data to better understand the characteristics of School Food Authorities (SFA) 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 will be 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 2024 funding will support additional research activities or dissemination products as needed.

## **ENSURE EQUITABLE AND CONSISTENT ACCESS TO FNS PROGRAMS FOR ELIGIBLE POPULATIONS**

### **Operating WIC in the Territories and Tribal Organizations Compared to Geographic WIC State Agencies**

WIC operates in 89 State agencies, including five territories (Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands) and 33 Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs). While the requirements for all WIC State agencies are the same, circumstances in the territories and ITOs, such as food costs related to transporting supplies long distances, could make program operations qualitatively different than in other State agencies. This study will conduct case studies in a sample of territories and ITOs to examine how operations are uniquely different than in the geographic WIC States agencies and how this impacts the program experience. Findings from the study could inform program or policy adjustments to ensure equitable operations and services for all WIC participants.

### **Understanding the Characteristics and Motivations of Online SNAP Shoppers**

Using the Anti-fraud Locator Using EBT Retailer Transactions (ALERT) data, this study will identify households that redeem a significant portion of their SNAP benefit online. Then the study will survey these households to understand their experiences with and motivations for using online shopping to redeem their SNAP benefits. The survey will also seek to understand how their online SNAP purchases may differ from their SNAP purchases made in a brick-and-mortar store.

### **Developing Models for Tribal Administration of SNAP**

This study will develop models for potentially transitioning SNAP from a State-administered to a Tribally-administered program for Tribal members or in parts of Indian Country. The study will identify the specific activities, resources, and requirements necessary to transition to Tribal administration. The study will determine how State agencies could transition services, functions, and activities and how that varies by the size or the resources of the Tribe and the State-Tribal relationship. The study will also determine whether statutory or regulatory changes would be necessary to allow for the change in administration.

### **Longitudinal Study of SNAP Households**

This will fund the second round of data collection including food purchases from a subsample of households in the study. This study, which began in FY 2023, will monitor how changes in SNAP policy and benefit levels affect SNAP households' participation status, food purchases, and diet quality. The study uses a longitudinal design, following a nationally representative sample of SNAP households to collect data annually, regardless of their continued SNAP participation status. Data collection will include food security, food purchases, dietary intakes, awareness and utilization of SNAP-Ed and SNAP Employment and Training (E&T), use of online purchasing or mobile payment, satisfaction with the recertification process and reporting, employment status, and utilization of other nutrition assistance and support programs. Data collected will be used as a baseline for future Thrifty Food Plan reevaluations. Subsequent rounds of data collection will be funded with annual appropriated SNAP research funds.

### **Support for Assessment of 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.

### **Participant Access to WIC Approved Vendors**

WIC State agencies must ensure adequate participant access to supplemental foods through authorized WIC vendors. Determinations of whether vendors are needed for participant access are used in a variety of situations, including when a vendor applicant does not meet all selection criteria but must be authorized to ensure participant access, when a violative vendor may be disqualified or must be retained to ensure participant access, and when determining whether the program must pay for certain types of EBT equipment. This proposal is a follow-on to analysis work being conducted in FY 2023 to examine participant access to authorized vendors. In order to address the gaps in access identified through the analysis work, this study will aim to establish a set of options for State agencies to consider ensuring adequate participant access to authorized vendors.

### **TEFAP Provider Study**

FNS plans to conduct a formal research study of The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) State agencies 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 that are 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 vs. 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 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 improve customer service.

### **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 programs can have on States, schools, and SFAs, 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 existing studies. For example, the combined School Nutrition and Meal Cost/School Food Purchase Study will be designed in such a way as to allow comparisons between outcomes (including meal production costs, student satisfaction, and operational factors) by whether or not the SFA is in a State that provides school meals to all students at no

charge. This contract would secure contractor support for additional analyses of existing data as well as dissemination of findings specific to school meals for all policies.

### **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 in calendar year 2023 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 Program’s actions to ensure equity. Results are used in the budget process to support program management and to address program performance. Reporting will include short, focused reports on special topics, as well as earlier release of key national estimates.

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

### **Understanding Participant Experiences in SNAP Employment and Training**

Given proposals to increase work requirements in SNAP and efforts to engage more participants in Employment and Training (E&T) activities, little is known about the lived experiences of SNAP participants as they move through the SNAP certification process, learn about work requirements, engage with an E&T provider, and seek employment after training completion. This study seeks to engage with SNAP work registrants—including SNAP E&T participants and ABAWDs—through focus groups, in-depth interviews, and photovoice methods to learn about their perceptions and experiences in navigating work requirements, seeking training opportunities, and finding employment. This study will enable an understanding of how work requirements and E&T policy play out in the lives of SNAP participants and help them obtain employment and increase their earnings. The debt ceiling amended the statutory purpose of SNAP to include assisting “low-income adults in obtaining employment and increasing their earnings.” This study further supports FNS’ efforts to improve customer service consistent with Executive Order 14058.

### **Analysis of Infant Formula Competitive Bidding System**

This study will examine the WIC program’s competitive bidding system for infant formula. Through this study, USDA will assess both the process and effectiveness of the competitive bidding system. The study will also examine how competitive bidding affects access to infant formula, as well as WIC benefits and services.

### **Literature Review on Anemia in Children**

When WIC began in the early 1970s, the prevalence of childhood anemia was higher than today. Conducting anemia testing in WIC clinics has been an important component of intake throughout the program’s history. A move to more remote certification could have implications for anemia testing. This study will examine the literature on childhood anemia rates, provide

information to the WIC program regarding anemia prevalence in the population, and implications for timing and frequency of anemia testing at WIC clinics. It will also include a summary of key mechanisms by which healthcare providers collect information and make recommendations for WIC regarding best practices for gathering and using the information.

### **Policy and Practices of SNAP State Agencies in Screening Applicants for Exemptions**

During the SNAP certification process, there are several points at which individuals should be screened for exemptions and exceptions from the work requirements, including the general work requirement (exemption), the ABAWD work requirement (exception), and mandatory SNAP E&T. Conducting these screenings properly ensures that only appropriate individuals are referred to SNAP Employment and Training programs. The screening points include determining who is subject to the general work requirement, who is an ABAWD that may qualify for an exemption, and who is a college student that meets the criteria for SNAP eligibility. In addition, when an individual is referred to SNAP Employment and Training, the training should meet their skills and needs and they should be able to receive the necessary participant reimbursement (e.g., transportation costs). This study seeks to survey SNAP State agencies, and conduct case studies in a few States, to understand their policies, guidance, and tools for screening SNAP applicants. Gathering this information will enable better Federal oversight and technical assistance to States on how to appropriately screen SNAP applicants.

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

Fiscal Year 2024 funding will fund additional iterations of this study, which provides contractor support for 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 Education Agencies (LEAs) designed to collect timely information on topics of immediate or ongoing interest or emerging concern. Modeled after the Census Household Pulse Survey initiated by the U.S. 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.

### **Child Nutrition Analytics and Modeling**

Fiscal Year 2024 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.

### **Quick Response Surveys for Child Nutrition, WIC, and SNAP**

Fiscal Year 2024 funding will be used to award a new blanket purchase agreement through which FNS can field single-topic studies with shorter timeframes than typical contracted studies 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.

### **School Meal Operations Study**

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 States and school districts, administrative data, and 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. FY 2024 funds will be used to establish a new five-year contract that will support data collection in School Year 2025-26 and beyond. Results are used to inform Child Nutrition programs management and policy development.

### **Systematic Review of SNAP Research and Future Directions**

FNS has conducted a wide breadth of research on SNAP over the past 20 years. This project will fund the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to convene a workshop to conduct a systematic review of FNS-sponsored research on SNAP over this timeframe, to identify gaps in the research and recommend areas for future research. The workshop will result in a report that addresses key research findings and areas that need more research, as well as methodological challenges and solutions. Results of the workshop will help shape future decisions on the use of SNAP research funds.

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

FNS is committed to meeting the needs of U.S. nationals and citizens 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 for future program direction to ensure the needs of U.S. nationals and citizens in the territories are met.

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

### **Survey of Small SNAP Retailers – Characteristics and Technical Assistance Needs**

This study will survey small SNAP-authorized retailers to understand the characteristics of both the store and the store owner, the cost of initial inventory when newly SNAP-authorized, the acquisition of point-of-sale devices and the associated fees, the effectiveness of guidance and technical assistance from FNS, and the need for more assistance or materials in additional languages. Findings from the study would provide basic information on store characteristics and help FNS provide better support for small retailers in the areas of fraud prevention, program integrity, and overall technical assistance.

### **WIC Vendor Management Study**

This study will test a methodology for assessing improper payments made by authorized WIC vendors, as defined by the Payment Integrity Information Act of 2019 (PIIA). The goal is to develop a valid, reliable measure of vendor improper payments required as part of compliance with PIIA. The nature of vendor error and improper payments is fundamentally different for transactions occurring with EBT compared to paper WIC food instruments, as described in a recent FNS study of vendor management. This study will 1) develop and test a revised method, including potential utilization of Food Delivery Portal (FDP, formerly known as TIP) data, to measure WIC vendor improper payments in EBT, incorporating recommendations from a recent FNS study; and, if feasible, 2) conduct a nationally representative study to estimate WIC vendor improper payments to fulfill the PIIA reporting requirements.

### **WIC Analysis and Modeling**

This 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.

### **School Nutrition and Meal Cost and School Food Purchase Study**

Fiscal Year 2024 funding will support recruitment of participants and data collection (planned for School Year 2024-25) for this combined study. 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 towards 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 the national level and for subgroups of interest, such as schools/SFAs 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 Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands, Alaska, and Hawaii.

### **Summer Meals Research and Analysis**

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (PL 117-328, the Act) 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 will establish a flexible contract vehicle for examining

research questions related to these new programs in a timely manner. Funds this fiscal year will support research describing lessons learned from early implementation of these changes, which can be used to facilitate program expansion and improvements.

#### **APEC IV**

The Access, Participation, Eligibility and Certification (APEC) Study Series provides USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (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 the risk of improper payments present at multiple stages in the certification, meal claiming, and aggregation processes. Fiscal Year 2024 funding will support additional analysis as required.