

**FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN
FISCAL YEAR 2020**

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Please Note: This plan is a forecast of projects FNS expects to pursue in fiscal year 2020, 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 2020**

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) conducts a variety of 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 that are expected to be launched in fiscal year (FY) 2020. It reflects decisions by FNS’s program and research staff and leadership on the best use of available research funding to meet current information needs that are aligned with agency priorities to improve program efficiency, integrity, and nutrition. FNS developed this plan in consultation with the agencies of the 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 the National Institute of Food and Agriculture to improve diets through such efforts as the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Program.

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

**STRATEGIC GOAL:
PROVIDE AMERICANS WITH SAFE, NUTRITIOUS, AND SECURE FOOD**

ENSURE FNS PROGRAMS PAVE A PATHWAY TO SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Rapid Cycle Evaluations of Operational Improvements in SNAP Employment & Training (E&T) Programs

This study provides funding for testing small scale improvements in State SNAP E&T programs. Examples might include improving notices to participants or developing videos to promote E&T providers. States would receive funding to improve the operations of their SNAP E&T programs and an independent evaluator would assess the effectiveness of the innovation over a short-term period, usually a few months. If warranted, a tested intervention may be adjusted based on ongoing or continual evaluation feedback to improve its effectiveness. The evaluator would also provide technical assistance to the States when developing or implementing the operational improvement.

Best Practices in SNAP Employment and Training Programs

The Agricultural Act of 2014 requires a review every 5 years of existing programs and research to identify best practices in employment and training 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 employment and training programs. This review will focus on literature published during 2016 to 2020.

Assessing SNAP Participants' Fitness for Work

SNAP statute requires that SNAP participants between the ages of 16 and 59 register for work or be registered by the State agency, unless they receive a Federal exemption. Among the exemptions include being found mentally or physically unfit for employment. States have varying ways of determining if an individual is fit for work. This study seeks to understand how States implement this provision and the challenges they face in providing good customer service to SNAP participants. The study will conduct a review of State policy and guidance related to determining whether individuals are fit for work. The study will also include interviews with SNAP eligibility workers to understand how the policy is interpreted and implemented and the challenges that arise with serving the needs of their clients.

WIC Participation among Children who Leave the WIC Infant and Toddler Feeding Practices Study-2

“Feeding My Baby,” is a FNS-sponsored national longitudinal study of infants enrolled in WIC during early infancy and followed through age 6 years, designed to measure infant and child feeding practices, sources of nutrition support and education, satisfaction with WIC services, and nutrition and health outcomes. While the longitudinal study continues to collect data from study participants regardless of continued WIC participation, the study does not verify WIC participation status of children who withdraw from the study. The project proposes to use WIC administrative data to determine whether children who withdrew from the longitudinal study continued to participate in WIC. This information will enhance interpretation of study data and provide a more accurate description of WIC retention and factors associated with WIC retention among the cohort of children participating in the study.

Follow-up of the WIC Infant and Toddler Feeding Practices Study-2 cohort at 9 Years Old
“Feeding My Baby,” is a FNS-sponsored national longitudinal study of infants enrolled in WIC during early infancy and followed through age 6 years, designed to measure infant and child feeding practices, sources of nutrition support and education, satisfaction with WIC services, and nutrition and health outcomes through the child’s sixth birthday. This project will allow FNS to conduct a follow-up survey when the children enrolled in WIC-ITFPS-2 are 9 years old. The follow-up study will gather dietary, food security, health, and other data to examine the association of duration and intensity of WIC participation with child and family outcomes.

UTILIZE DATA-DRIVEN STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE PROGRAM INTEGRITY

Updating Standardized State Heating and Cooling Utility Allowance Values

A 2017 FNS study developed and recommended a methodology for constructing State Standard Utility Allowances (SUAs) using data from the Residential Energy Consumption Survey (RECS) and the American Community Survey (ACS). This study would use more recent RECS and ACS data to update the Heating and Cooling SUAs developed as part of the previous study.

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

This periodic study examines improper payment rates in the school meals programs. Previous cycles identified the major sources of program errors at the national level and provided an evaluation of strategies to reduce errors. APEC IV will provide new, nationally representative estimates of error rates for School Year 2022–2023 and will build on prior versions by exploring means to update the estimates with more frequent and limited indicator data. The intended result is to provide quicker feedback on the effectiveness of policy and operational changes in reducing error and better data for targeted action, accelerating the cycle of program improvement.

WIC Certification Error Estimates – Aging for IPERA Reporting (annual)

This project conducts the annual between-study interim adjustments, or “aging,” of data on WIC certification errors for reporting the USDA financial reports. It helps fulfill the requirements of the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Act (IPERA) of 2010. Data from the most recent national survey of WIC participants are adjusted annually using data from the census of WIC participant administrative records contained in the WIC Participant and Program Characteristics report series and other WIC administrative data.

WIC Vendor Management Study

This study provides a national assessment of WIC vendor management practices and vendor violations and provides the basis for annual estimates of vendor erroneous payments required as part of compliance with the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Act (IPERA) of 2010. All State WIC Agencies are required to transition to electronic benefit transfer (EBT) by 2020. The nature of vendor error and improper payments is fundamentally different for transactions occurring with EBT compared to paper WIC food instruments. This study will 1) develop and test a revised method to measure WIC vendor error in EBT and 2) conduct a nationally representative study to estimate WIC vendor error to fulfill the IPERA reporting requirements.

PROVIDE AMERICANS WITH ACCESS TO NUTRITIOUS FOOD

Understanding the Relationship between Poverty and Food Security

While economic conditions of households and the larger economy have ebbed and flowed, SNAP participation levels and measures of food insecurity have not necessarily. It appears that not all households with similar circumstances experience the same food security status – thus,

other factors can be important determinants of food insecurity. This study will explore the relationship between economic measures, including those related to poverty, and the food security of households. Additional data from the Census PULSE survey conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic will be used to understand at the state and federal levels the impact of COVID policy changes and feeding efforts on food insecurity.

Food Security Status and Well-Being of Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP) Participants in Puerto Rico

The Additional Supplemental Appropriations for Disaster Relief Act, 2019 (P.L. 116-20) provided funding to conduct an independent study in Puerto Rico to assess the impact of the additional benefits provided to participants in Puerto Rico's Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP) in the wake of Hurricane Maria. This study will measure food security, health status, and well-being among NAP participants at a point in time after the extra disaster benefits were provided. However, there are limitations with a retroactive analysis in attributing any causal impacts to the additional benefits.

Update to Feasibility Study on Implementing SNAP in Puerto Rico

The House Committee on Appropriations provided funds to update the 2010 feasibility study on implementing SNAP in Puerto Rico. Specifically the Committee asked for updates on the administrative, operational, and program integrity sections of the report which identify gaps and compare the changes necessary to implement SNAP in Puerto Rico moving from its current Nutrition Assistance Program. The Committee also asks for a detailed plan with specific steps and timelines to address and remedy the identified gaps.

WIC Eligibility and Coverage Estimates (annual)

This project, the latest in a series, will develop a set of national and State level estimates of the number of individuals eligible for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) benefits in 2019. 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 and children. Results are used in the budget process to support program management and address program performance.

FACILITATE AN INCREASE IN NUTRITIOUS DIETS GROUNDED IN FOOD-BASED SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE

Assessment of Online Tools for Uniform Data Collection and Reporting for SNAP-Ed

Currently, State Agencies submit State Plans, Annual Reports, and administrative data to FNS in hard-to-use documents and forms. In addition, States roll-up this information from local Implementing Agencies, which results in long and often complicated reports. An online data collection tool would allow States and their Implementing Agencies to enter and submit data and reports on SNAP-Ed in a timely, uniform, and detailed manner. This would allow FNS to more easily use and synthesize SNAP-Ed data across all States. The purpose of this study would be to assess the suitability of existing online data collection and reporting tools being used by some SNAP-Ed providers or in other programs with similar reporting requirements to SNAP-Ed. The assessment will include a requirements document, potential tools that could be adapted for SNAP-Ed and the cost for developing and or implementing a uniform online data collection and reporting platform for SNAP-Ed.

Review of Evidence on Summer Feeding Programs and Models and Food Security, Diet, and Health of Children and Adolescents

Studies have demonstrated that receipt of food or food benefits during the summer when school is not in session is associated with improved food security of children. This review will summarize all evidence on the association of summer feeding programs and models of delivery on food security, diet, and health-related outcomes of children and adolescents.

Recommendations for future research on summer feeding models will be included in the review. This review will also inform FNS communication regarding summer feeding programs and models.

Review of Evidence on Acceptance of New Foods and Dietary Patterns

Studies have demonstrated that it may take up to ten attempts to introduce a new food to young children for them to accept the food. Other studies demonstrate that some strategies to promote healthier dietary patterns among children and adolescents show promise in influencing new dietary patterns, particularly if the strategy is sustained. This review will summarize all evidence on the association of strategies to improve acceptance of new foods and healthier dietary patterns on diet and health-related outcomes of children and adolescents. Recommendations for future research will be included in the review. This review will also inform FNS communication and program guidance.

Review of evidence on WIC participation among Women and Birth Outcomes

Studies have shown that WIC participation during pregnancy is associated with a reduced risk of adverse pregnancy outcomes, including preterm delivery. Studies that are more recent employ updated statistical methods to avoid limitations of earlier studies. This review will update the evidence on the association of WIC participation during pregnancy and maternal and infant outcomes, including maternal mortality and morbidity, preterm delivery, infant mortality, low birth weight, and small-for-gestational age. Recommendations for future research on WIC participation and pregnancy risk and outcomes will be included in the review. This review will also inform FNS communication regarding the WIC Program.

Review of Evidence on WIC Participation among Infants and Children and Dietary and Health Outcomes

Studies have shown that WIC participation is associated with dietary and health benefits for infants and children. This review will update the evidence on the association of WIC participation during infancy and childhood on dietary practices, food security, weight status, growth, and health outcomes. Of particular interest is how WIC participation beyond 12 months (and 24 months) is associated with benefits to children. Recommendations for future research on WIC participation during childhood and diet, weight, and health outcomes will be included in the review. This review will also inform FNS communication regarding the WIC Program.

Support for NHANES Data Collection on WIC Participants

The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) collects detailed information, including dietary intake, anthropometry, and health status data, from a nationally representative sample of Americans annually to enable tracking of diet and health related information over time. This project will provide support to collect infant and young child feeding information on WIC-aged infants and young children participating in NHANES in survey years 2023 and 2024. The inclusion of this information in NHANES will ensure that the data can be used for analysis of feeding practices, dietary intake, nutrient status, growth, and health of infants

and young children participating in WIC, including comparisons to low income non-participants and children from higher income families.

OTHER SUPPORT FOR PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE

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.

CN Analytics and Modeling

This funding will provide financial support for a variety of analyses that are conducted to respond to legislative, budget and policy questions critical to the Child Nutrition programs. The funding could support additional analyses using existing data from large nationally representative studies.

Quick Response Studies for Child Nutrition

In addition to its large-scale evaluations, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is building the capacity to field single-topic studies with shorter timeframes that respond to current policy and program needs. This funding will support these efforts to ensure FNS has multiple avenues available to support its practice of evidence-based decision making.

WIC Analytics and Modeling

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