

**FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE  
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN  
FISCAL YEAR 2021**

**Please Note:** This plan is a forecast of projects FNS expects to pursue in fiscal year 2021, 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 2021

## 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) 2021. It reflects decisions by FNS' 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.

## PROJECTS BY PRIORITY TOPIC:

### EMBED RACIAL JUSTICE ACROSS FEDERAL PROGRAMS

#### **SERVING SNAP APPLICANTS AND PARTICIPANTS WITH LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY**

SNAP State Agencies are required to translate materials related to all aspects of program administration (e.g. applications, notices, charge letters, informational documents) into languages other than English to serve the needs of their clients with limited English proficiency (LEP). States also have the opportunity to provide LEP services through their SNAP Education and Training (E&T) programs. FNS has limited information on the breadth (i.e. which languages) and depth (i.e. what types of documents) of how State Agencies serve their clients with LEP, or whether they offer LEP services through their SNAP E&T programs. This study will survey all 53 SNAP State Agencies to catalog which languages State agencies offer for which types of documents, and whether or not they offer LEP services through their SNAP E&T program. The study will ask States how they determine which languages should be offered and how they manage the translation process, and if they offer any SNAP E&T LEP services and what services they offer if they do.

#### **STRATEGIES USED BY FOOD DISTRIBUTION PROGRAMS TO REACH UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS**

Congress directed the USDA to conduct a study on the challenges that the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), and other food distribution programs administered by the Secretary, face in reaching underserved populations, emphasizing homebound and elderly individuals unable to physically travel to a distribution location. The purpose of this study is to conduct a quick-response survey of all Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) and State Agencies administering FDPIR to determine strategies and flexibilities used to distribute food to underserved individuals who are eligible for FDPIR, specifically homebound and elderly individuals. The study will also examine the use of proxies to reach participants, challenges encountered in distributing food, and potential improvements to the program.

#### **STAKEHOLDER MEETING ON WIC PARTICIPATION AND MATERNAL MORTALITY**

Congress directed the USDA Secretary to conduct a review of existing evidence and develop a plan to build new evidence on the impact of the WIC Program on reducing maternal mortality among specific populations with the highest maternal mortality rates in the U.S., which includes African American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Indigenous (American Indian and Alaskan Native) mothers. Emphasis will be placed on the needs of disadvantaged communities of color. Through a FY 2020 interagency agreement with the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), FNS is currently conducting a systematic review examining associations between WIC participation and maternal health outcomes, including maternal mortality. FNS proposes to use FY 2021 funds to plan and hold a stakeholder meeting to discuss the results of the AHRQ review and plan future studies and actions.

## REMOVE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING FNS PROGRAMS

### **USING ROBOTIC PROCESS AUTOMATION OR RELATED TECHNOLOGY IN SNAP ELIGIBILITY PROCESSES**

Several States have piloted the use of Robotic Process Automation (RPA), also known as bots, for certain tasks in their SNAP eligibility process. RPA is a new technological initiative in the human services sector and involves business process automation that allows computers to automate and complete certain simple repetitive processes or tasks. This can increase efficiency, streamline processes, and improve service delivery by completing tasks that would require caseworker time. This study will assess the efficacy of using this technology to assist in application processing in up to three States by assessing the impacts on caseworker time, accuracy of tasks completed by the computer, and administrative costs as well as documenting the benefits and challenges to SNAP agencies.

### **ASSESSMENT OF MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES FOR USING SNAP BENEFITS**

The Agricultural Act of 2018 authorizes the use of mobile technologies for the purpose of accessing SNAP benefits. This allows SNAP participants to input their Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card into a mobile technology, such as Apple Pay or Google Pay, and make SNAP purchases at the point-of-sale without the presence of the EBT card. The Act requires that FNS approve not more than five projects to pilot the use of this technology and then determine if mobile technology should be authorized nationwide. This study will assess the pilots in the areas of participant access, ease of use, and program integrity to facilitate the determination of whether to broadly authorize the use of mobile technologies.

## ADDRESS NUTRITION INSECURITY THROUGH ACCESS TO NUTRITIOUS FOODS

### **UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POVERTY, WELL-BEING, AND FOOD SECURITY**

Research has shown that the economic and demographic circumstances of households are closely correlated with food security status. However, not all households with similar circumstances experience the same food security status – other factors can be important determinants. This study will identify measures of poverty and well-being associated with household food security status among SNAP eligible participants and non-participants in persistent poverty counties, defined as counties where 20 percent or more of their population lived in poverty in the last four decennial Censuses. Moving beyond household income, policy-actionable elements of well-being and material deprivation such as mental health, depression, health-related quality of life, disablement, medical expenditures, alcohol or opioid addiction, place of residence, and unequal sharing of resources within the household may impact food security status and SNAP participation. This project will conduct county-level representative surveys of household food security, well-being, and material hardship measures in at least six persistent-poverty counties to help identify factors other than income that impact food security status. The study will also conduct in-depth interviews with a subsample in six counties to provide additional context for the survey findings. Counties will represent a variety of spatial types (urban, suburban, and rural) and other policy relevant characteristics. Collecting representative data at the county level will also enable improved estimates of county-level food security status since official data at this granular level is unavailable.

## **FARM TO SCHOOL CENSUS**

Farm to School activities aim to strengthen knowledge about agriculture, food, and nutrition through hands-on learning; increase availability of local foods in the Child Nutrition programs; increase opportunities for farmers and other food producers; and support local and regional economic development. This census and data analysis will provide information on the magnitude of local sourcing procurement and the prevalence of other farm to school activities during School Year (SY) SY 2022-2023. The study will also examine disparities in access to local foods and participation in other farm to school activities and the barriers, including infrastructure, causing them. Data collection will take place in SY 2023-2024.

## **2021 SUMMER ELECTRONIC BENEFIT TRANSFER (EBT) FOR CHILDREN EVALUATION**

This study will document how the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (“Summer EBT”) expansion projects awarded in FY 2021 were implemented and administered in 2021 through 2023 by four experienced grantees—Cherokee (food package model), Connecticut (debit card model), Missouri (debit card), Oregon (debit card)—and to describe the experiences of EBT processors, participants, and retailers with Summer EBT in these States/ITOs. The study will collect and analyze EBT data from the grantees in order to describe and assess participant benefit use across the three summers. The study will also describe how the introduction of Pandemic EBT impacted the implementation and administration of Summer EBT. Receipt and use of Pandemic EBT will be explored through focus groups with recipients of Summer EBT.

## **WIC BREASTFEEDING POLICY INVENTORY II**

Since its establishment, USDA has supported breastfeeding within the WIC Program through a number of legislative and programmatic initiatives, such as providing State and local WIC agencies with (1) tools and training resources to support breastfeeding, and (2) funds to establish and support breastfeeding peer counseling activities. This overall project will provide an update to the first WIC Breastfeeding Policy Inventory, published in 2015, yielding a comprehensive description of breastfeeding statistics, policies, procedures, and practices at the local and State WIC agency levels, including implementation of peer counseling programs, staff training on breastfeeding, utilization of the national breastfeeding campaign, and best practices to improve breastfeeding initiation and duration rates and reduce disparities. The study will also examine equity in the availability of breastfeeding supports and explore methods for routine collection of information on the number of WIC breastfeeding peer counselors. The project deliverables with FY 2021 funds will support development of a comprehensive sampling plan, development and pretesting of survey instruments, and other required supporting materials.

## **ADDRESS INEQUITIES IN OUR ECONOMY**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW ON SUBSIDIZED EMPLOYMENT AND WORK-BASED LEARNING**

The Agricultural Act of 2018 permitted subsidized employment and work-based learning as allowable components of SNAP E&T. Under subsidized employment, SNAP E&T funds can be used to pay a portion of the E&T participants’ wages thereby reducing the cost to employers. Work-based learning provides E&T participants with real-life work experiences where they can develop their skills and enhance their employability. There is considerable research on these

two areas in other contexts—mainly Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Department of Labor programs—but less is known about how they may be implemented in the context of SNAP E&T. For example, the SNAP E&T programs would need to be designed so that the income earned from subsidized employment or work-based learning does not make the E&T participants ineligible for SNAP. This study will conduct a literature review on subsidized employment and work-based learning, summarize the findings, and suggest ways that they could be applied to SNAP E&T. This information will also be used to inform the rulemaking process to implement these components in SNAP E&T.

## SUPPORT FOR PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE

### **SCHOOL MEALS OPERATION STUDY—SY 2023-24**

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. FY 2021 funds will be used to support data collection in SY 2023-2024. Results are used to inform Child Nutrition programs management and policy development.

### **CHILD NUTRITION 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 the Child Nutrition programs. The funding could support additional analyses and data visualizations using existing data from FNS National Data Bank, FNS studies, or large nationally representative studies. Proposed ideas include a further exploration of associations between components of meal costs and meal quality and an examination of local school wellness policies by the income, racial, ethnic diversity of the school (School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study-local policies linked data).

### **QUICK RESPONSE STUDIES FOR CHILD NUTRITION**

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. This funding will support these efforts to ensure FNS has multiple avenues available to support its practice of evidence-based decision-making.

### **2021 CACFP MEAL CLAIMS FEASIBILITY STUDY**

To comply with the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Improvement Act (IPERIA) of 2012, this study will test an alternative method for calculating meal claiming error for meals that are claimed but not served in Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and family day care homes (FDCHs). It will look to identify and test proxy measures for actual FDCH meal counts on particular days and for particular meal services. Data collected from sampled FDCHs will be used to identify the best proxy for the day of observation meal counts, the measurement error

introduced by using such a proxy that accounts for the natural day-to-day variation in participation, and whether the proxy can be used to determine a reliable national rate of FDCH meal claiming error. If the alternative measures are reliable proxies for observation day meal counts, they can be compared to the meal claims submitted to the State. This will allow for the estimate of national meal claiming error and the dollar amount associated with the error.

#### **2021 CACFP ASSESSMENT OF SPONSOR TIERING DETERMINATION**

This study will assess and report on the assignment of CACFP family day care homes (FDCH) to incorrect meal compensation tiers and the dollar value of those errors. The methodology will be similar to the CACFP Tiering Assessments conducted by FNS from 2005 to 2015, which quantified the number and the amount of improper payments that are due to CACFP homes paid at the Tier 1 (higher reimbursement) rate when eligible for the Tier 2 (lower) rate; or conversely, homes paid at the Tier 2 rate when eligible for Tier 1. The study relies on multiple data sources, including provider income documentation, census block/tract data, and school boundary information to verify eligibility for the classification of FDCHs into Tier 1 or 2 reimbursement rates.

#### **MEASURING SNAP ACCESS, TRENDS AND IMPACTS – MICROSIMULATION MODEL**

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.

#### **CHALLENGES FOR SNAP STATE AGENCIES IN IMPLEMENTING CORRECTIVE ACTION PLANS**

SNAP State agencies are required to develop Corrective Action Plans (CAP) if the State's payment accuracy or timeliness measures do not meet certain thresholds compared to other States. States also must develop CAPs in response to audit or Management Evaluation findings. CAPs are step-by-step roadmaps of State activities and initiatives to improve the measures or resolve issues identified in findings. This study seeks to understand the challenges and barriers that State agencies face when trying to develop and implement CAPs by conducting case studies in nine States to identify common themes. The study will provide best practices or guidance for implementing CAPs that could be shared with State agencies.

#### **WIC PARTICIPANT AND PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS REPORT 2022**

Federal regulation requires a biennial report of WIC participant characteristics of women, infants, and children enrolled in WIC. This project will generate two reports and supporting datasets using information from State management information systems based on a census of WIC participants. One report will include information on participant income, assigned nutrition risk, weight status, anemia prevalence, breastfeeding initiation and duration, demographic characteristics, and participation in the program by category (i.e. pregnant, breastfeeding and postpartum women; infants; and children) within each priority level and by migrant farmworker households. Information will be reported at the national and State agency level. The second report will summarize types, quantities of foods prescribed to participants and their costs

provided through WIC. The reports provide a wide range of information on WIC participants to inform measures of program performance.

#### **WIC CERTIFICATION ERROR ESTIMATES – AGING FOR IPERIA REPORTING (ANNUAL) (INTERNAL ANALYSIS)**

This project conducts the annual aging of data on WIC certification errors needed for USDA financial reports, and to fulfill the requirements of the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Improvement Act (IPERIA) of 2012. 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 Participant and Program Characteristics reports and other WIC administrative data.

#### **WIC ELIGIBILITY AND COVERAGE ESTIMATES**

This project, the latest in an annual series, will develop a set of national and State level estimates of the number of individuals eligible for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for WIC benefits in 2020. The report will present estimates by participant subgroup at the national level, and WIC coverage rates for all national and State level estimates. WIC coverage rates are also estimated by race and Hispanic ethnicity. This annual study examines how well WIC reaches eligible women, infants, and children. Results are used in the budget process to support program management and to address program performance.

#### **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 multi-state or nationally representative studies. Potential analyses include WIC participation among specific populations and during specific periods such as the 2020 pandemic. In FY 2021, a task will be requested to update statistical models for estimating annual error and improper payments rates for WIC certification.

#### **QUICK RESPONSE STUDIES FOR WIC**

This project enables FNS to field single-topic surveys with shorter timeframes to respond to current policy and program needs, to ensure multiple avenues are available to support its practice of evidence-based decision-making. In FY 2021, FNS proposes to conduct a Quick Response Survey with WIC State agencies that will examine the remote delivery of WIC services during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey will collect information on types of remote certification processes used, utilization of referral data for nutrition risk assessment, and type of remote nutrition education offered to participants.

#### **WIC PARTICIPATION AMONG SNAP AND MEDICAID RECIPIENTS**

The purpose of this study is to examine methods and options for producing state level estimates of the percentage of pregnant women, infants, and children under five participating in SNAP under the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C. 2011 et seq.) but not in WIC, and the percentage of pregnant women, infants, and children up to age five participating in Medicaid with income less than the limit in section 17(d)(2)(A)(i) of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 but not



in WIC. Congress directed these estimates as part of the report accompanying the FY 2021 appropriation.