

**FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN
FISCAL YEAR 2022**

Please Note: This plan is a forecast of projects FNS expects to pursue in Fiscal Year 2022, 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 2022

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) 2022. 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 Gus Schumacher Nutrition 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:

STRENGTHEN OUR RESPONSE TO THE FOOD HARDSHIP CRISIS CAUSED BY COVID-19 AND SUPPORT TRANSITION TO POST-PANDEMIC NUTRITION PROGRAM OPERATIONS

Have SNAP State Agencies Shifted Operations in the Aftermath of COVID?: When the COVID-19 pandemic began in early spring 2020, many SNAP State Agencies had to make significant adjustments to their processes in order to process SNAP applications and issue benefits remotely. States varied in their readiness for remote work but had to adapt rapidly to the new environment. This study seeks to understand how SNAP State Agencies have made permanent operational changes since the start of the pandemic and how they have built upon the innovation initiated by the pandemic. Such changes may include: equipment purchases to facilitate additional telework opportunities for employees, including eligibility workers; full-time remote employees; increased use of telephonic or electronic signatures; changes to document storage (i.e. cloud storage); and call center implementation or enhancements. Through a survey of all 53 SNAP State Agencies, this study seeks to understand the changes that have occurred in operations and norms since the pandemic and how State Agencies have increased their preparedness in the event of another major work disruption.

INCORPORATE A RACIAL EQUITY LENS INTO INTERNAL AGENCY OPERATIONS AND THE DESIGN AND ADMINISTRATION OF FEDERAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS.

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 the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) benefits in 2021. 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.

Review of Evidence on Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Human Milk Feeding

Studies have identified racial and ethnic disparities in infant feeding practices in the United States. This review will summarize the evidence on racial and ethnic disparities in human milk feeding as well as evidence on factors associated with these disparities, including but potentially not limited to economic hardship, poverty, food insecurity, access to care and support, education, family structure, acculturation, and beliefs and perceptions. Research gaps will be identified and recommended for future research. This review will also inform FNS communication and program guidance.

WIC Research Grants

This project would make available funds to researchers, including graduate and postdoctoral students working on research related to the Agency's priorities on WIC. The research proposed may use data from FNS studies or other sources and may involve collaboration with an FNS social scientist. Priorities for research topics will be set by the Office of Policy Support in consultation with the Supplemental Food Programs Division to inform FNS's priority to decrease racial, ethnic, and geographic disparities in access to WIC while increasing enrollment and retention in the Program.

Assessing Equity in Work Requirements and SNAP Employment & Training: A priority of the Biden Administration is advancing racial equity and support for underserved communities throughout the Federal Government. In SNAP, one area that may have disparities is the execution of work requirements and access to E&T services. SNAP State Agencies often do not have race or ethnicity data on SNAP participants because it is not required to determine eligibility. This study would identify what data State agencies might collect but not report to FNS, and identify other potential data sources, such as SNAP E&T providers or other partner organizations, to assess whether racial or other disparities exist in the administration of work requirements or E&T services. It would assess potential data sources and identify questions about disparities that could be answered with the available data. It would also identify questions that cannot be answered with existing data and make recommendations about what data FNS should consider collecting. The study would also identify the key processes used to identify which individuals are subject to work requirements and/or referred to E&T services to assess whether or not these processes drive disparities.

Assessing Equity in the Implementation of ABAWD Waivers: SNAP State Agencies have discretion when applying to FNS for waivers of the time limit for Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents (ABAWDs). ABAWD waivers have geographic components that States must justify based on the appropriate criteria. Because racial or other disparities are often place-based (e.g. counties, zip codes), there may be inequities in which geographic areas, including tribal areas, are included in the request. This study seeks to understand the disparities that may exist in decisions when States choose to not request Statewide requests and make decisions on what areas to include in a waiver request. The study will review ABAWD waivers by examining historical requests compared to the geographic areas that may have been eligible for inclusion in the request.

REFLECT THE LATEST NUTRITION SCIENCE IN FEDERAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS AND SUPPORT ADHERENCE BY PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS.

Evaluation Support for Healthy School Meal Practices

School meals are a critical source of nutrition for children and adolescents. This effort would provide evaluation support to test different activities that support serving healthy meals and improving the school nutrition environment. This would include the ability to do small scale

evaluations to assess the effectiveness of practices such as increased use of scratch cooking, reduced use of processed foods, limits on added sugars, or changes to the school food environment such as limiting competitive food availability.

WIC Infant and Toddler Feeding Practices Study-3

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides nutritious foods, nutrition education, breastfeeding support, and health and social service referrals to low-income, nutritionally at-risk pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children up to five years of age. The proposed study will use a longitudinal design, following mothers and their infants from the prenatal period until the infant's fifth birthday, regardless of their continued WIC participation status. Information on early feeding practices; dietary intake; nutritional status and health; WIC awareness and utilization; maternal education, employment, and satisfaction with WIC services; and family utilization of childcare and other sources of support will be collected at regular intervals throughout the infant's first five years of life. Data collection for the proposed study is projected to begin in 2024, eleven years after initiation of the previous WIC Infant and Toddler Feeding Practices Study. FY 2022 funds will support development of a comprehensive sampling plan, development and pretesting of survey instruments, and completion of all materials for Office of Management and Budget approval (FY 2023 and FY 2024 funds will support full cost of the five-year study, estimated at \$24 million).

Assessing the Nutritional Quality of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) Food Package

The purpose of this project is to estimate the nutritional quality of the FDPIR food package as offered and as delivered. Nutritional quality of the food package will be measured using the Healthy Eating Index (HEI) scoring algorithm. In FY 2022, the methodology for the assessment will be developed and tested by Office of Policy Support in consultation with FNS's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion and the National Cancer Institute. Funds will be requested if contract support is indicated.

School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study (SNMCS)- 2

This study, approved and awarded in FY 2017, initiated data collection in January 2020. In early March 2020, data collection was terminated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A contract modification was awarded in FY 2021 to re-start data collection in School Year (SY) 2022-2023. FY 2022 funds will be used to fund the study through completion. The overall purpose of this comprehensive study is to 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. SNMCS-2 will also develop estimates of the cost of school meals for the outlying areas of Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands, Alaska, and Hawaii.

Measuring the Full Benefit of a School Meal

This study will assess the entire benefit of a school meal to the households (stretching beyond the meal). This effort would include a comparison of the retail value of a breakfast and lunch

consumed or brought from home as well as one that is equivalent in Healthy Eating Index (HEI) score as the school meals using 24-hour dietary intake data from the first School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study. The effort would also include a review of existing information about time spent by parents/guardians on preparing breakfasts and lunches for children (potentially using data from the American Time Use Survey) as well as an assessment of total financial costs saved or incurred by eating/not eating school meals. This would attempt to quantify the opportunity costs of participating/not participating in school meals, including any impacts to families participating in schools with universal free meals (meals at no cost to the student). Differential impacts by family income, race/ethnicity, and geographical location will be examined. The project will be carried out internally, but FY 2022 funds may be used to support supplementary analyses.

INCREASE ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION IN FEDERAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS.

Cooperative Agreements to study barriers to equitable access to FNS programs

This project would make available a cooperative agreement for an institution to award subgrants to researchers focused on studying barriers to equitable access to FNS programs, both during the pandemic and under non-pandemic circumstances, with the goal to uncover barriers to access and innovative policies that can help overcome them. The cooperative agreement, including priority topics for the subgrants, will be developed by the Office of Policy Support in coordination with the Child Nutrition Program.

Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: Report to Congress

This project will generate the required annual report to Congress on the effectiveness of State and local efforts to certify Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participant children for free school meals without the need for household applications. It will calculate state-specific performance metrics from data reported by State agencies and school food authorities. The project will also highlight direct certification operations in a handful of States for insight into successful strategies and promising practices.

Evaluation of Direct Certification for School Meals with Medicaid

Beginning School Year 2022-2023, USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) will conduct additional demonstrations to expand the evaluation of direct certification with Medicaid (DC-M) for both free and reduced-price meal eligibility in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP). DC-M is the use of Medicaid data files to identify children eligible to receive meals through the NSLP and SBP for free or reduced price without need of application. This project will provide evaluation support for the new demonstrations by examining the effectiveness of DC-M to directly certify children who are eligible for both free and reduced-price school meals but are not currently certified to receive meals; the effectiveness of DC-M to directly certify eligible children who are currently enrolled for free or reduced-price school meals based on a household application; and the effect of DC-M on participation and Federal reimbursement level in the school lunch and breakfast programs. The evaluation would be conducted during School Year 2023-2024.

Assessment of Nutrition Assistance Program Administration in American Samoa: American Samoa currently operates a block grant-funded nutrition assistance program that is available only to elderly, blind, or disabled individuals. The program issues paper coupons of which 20 percent are earmarked for the purchase of local commodities. American Samoa would like to expand its program to serve more low-income individuals and adapt some aspects of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, including updating their eligibility system and issuing benefits through Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT). This study is a capacity assessment to determine American Samoa's readiness to implement some aspects of SNAP and determine how much additional funding would be needed to serve all eligible low-income individuals.

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.

Tracking Progress on new WIC 390 Innovations: Through the American Rescue Plan Act, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) received \$390 million to carry out outreach, innovation, and program modernization efforts. These efforts will support the development, implementation, and evaluation of large-scale innovations to improve the experience of individuals enrolling and participating in WIC, with overall goals of increasing WIC participation among all eligible groups and reducing disparities in program delivery. The proposed project will allow FNS to track progress on the WIC 390 efforts by summarizing information and key measures reported to FNS on a regular basis by USDA contractors and grantees implementing the innovations. Monitoring data on process and outcome indicators will provide FNS with timely information on progress and challenges related to this major investment in WIC.

Increasing Enrollment in WIC through Medicaid and SNAP

In FY 2021, Congress directed FNS to generate estimates of (1) the percentage of pregnant women, infants, and children under 5 participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program but not in WIC, and (2) the percentage of income-eligible pregnant women, infants, and children up to age 5 participating in Medicaid but not in WIC. Results from these analyses identified a programmatic service gap in that many individuals who were automatically eligible for WIC were not participating, specifically those individuals eligible through Medicaid. Thus, the proposed project will directly address this gap and invest in State agencies that will implement and evaluate WIC, SNAP, and/or Medicaid data matching efforts. This project aims to leverage data interoperability to streamline cross-program participation, and ultimately increase the percentage of individuals enrolled in WIC via automatic eligibility. This project will be undertaken as part of the WIC Modernization Efforts, which are being funded through the American Rescue Plan Act, to increase participation by improving enrollment and the participant experience.

IMPROVE THE CONSUMER EXPERIENCE

Improving Coordination Between SNAP and Medicaid in State Agencies: SNAP and Medicaid serve similar populations, which provides opportunities for State Agencies administering the programs to coordinate policies and processes to improve efficiency, customer service, and program access. This study will conduct case studies in up to five states to understand the challenges with improving program coordination and highlight the best practices that could be shared with other states.

Understanding Good Customer Service Across SNAP State Agencies: All SNAP State Agencies are committed to providing high quality customer service to SNAP applicants and participants. States collect some data based on Federal requirements, such as application processing timeliness, but many States have developed State-specific measures and expectations or standards for customer service. Such measures may include: wait time for in-person office visits, call center wait time, and response time to inquiries or questions from applicants or participants. Such expectations or standards may include: same day application processing; accessible office hours; office layout and structure; and technology enhancements. “Through case studies in up to nine States, this study seeks to establish the key characteristics of good customer service and develop best practices to be shared with all State Agencies.

STRENGTHEN FEDERAL OVERSIGHT AND MANAGEMENT OF FEDERAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS TO FURTHER IMPROVE INTEGRITY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND CUSTOMER SERVICE.

Child Nutrition Pulse Survey

Modeled after the Census Household Pulse Survey initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic, this effort will collect information from Child Nutrition (CN) program operators at a determined frequency to examine policy relevant information under a quick turnaround timeframe.

Evaluation of Child Nutrition Program Grants: Technology Improvement

This project will establish a new mechanism (multi-holder BPA) for evaluation of Child Nutrition Program (CNP) Grants. FY 2022 funds will support a review of how other Federal and non-Federal agencies measure the effectiveness of grant-funded projects. This initial project will focus on developing a plan and metrics for evaluating technology improvement and equipment grants. Equity-focused metrics will be included. FY 2023 funds will support the evaluation of current grants in the CNPs. The Office of Policy Support will work in coordination with the Child Nutrition Program to prioritize the grants to be evaluated. Grants likely to be evaluated in FY 2023 are the Technology Improvement Grants to encourage State agencies that administer the CNP to propose innovative technology solutions that improve program accountability and efficiencies at both the State and local levels. The project will evaluate the grants after the process moves to formula based. FY 2023 funds may also support an evaluation of the

Equipment Grants for States to make competitive subgrants to Local Education Areas and schools to purchase equipment with value of \$1000 or more.

School Meals Operation Study (SY 2023–2024)

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. FY 2022 funds will be used to exercise option year 3 to support data collection in SY 2023–2024. Results are used to inform Child Nutrition Programs management and policy development.

Child Nutrition Research Grants

This project would make available funds to researchers, including graduate and postdoctoral students working on research related to the agency’s priorities on Child Nutrition. The research proposed through this mechanism may use data from FNS studies or other sources, collect new data, and may involve collaboration with an FNS social scientist. Priorities for research topics will be set by the Office of Policy Support in collaboration with the Child Nutrition Program.

Child Nutrition Analytic and Modeling

This funding will provide 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 FNS National Data Bank, FNS studies, and large national studies.

Quick Response Studies for Child Nutrition

In addition to its large-scale evaluations, the Food and Nutrition Service (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.

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

This project conducts the annual aging of data on WIC certification errors for reporting the USDA financial reports. It helps fulfill the requirements of the Payment Integrity Information Act (PIIA) of 2019. 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 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 WIC, to evaluate policy changes, and to support program requirements and priorities. The funding supports analyses using existing data from multi-state or nationally representative studies. Planned analyses for FY 2022 are to 1) update statistical models for estimating annual error and improper payments rates for WIC certification; 2) examine the impact of birth rate on participation of women, infants, and children

in WIC; 3) examine racial, ethnic, and geographic disparities in enrollment in WIC using WIC Participant and Program Characteristics data; 4) examine the association of implementation of FFCRA COVID-19 Waivers and ARPA CVB increase with WIC participation and retention trends using data from the WIC Waiver Project and FNS administrative data; and 5) analyze WIC State Agency (SA) plans for FY 2022 to support analyses performed under the existing WIC Breastfeeding Policy Inventory-II project and other projects. Additional analyses proposed for FY 2022 include 1) building longitudinal State Agency files of WIC visits from infancy through childhood using Management Information Systems to examine program retention and health outcomes; and 2) estimating access to WIC approved vendors by area demographics of U.S. census tracts.

Quick Response Studies for WIC

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

Extent of SNAP Benefit Trafficking: 2018-2020: This study will update estimates of the extent of trafficking – the exchange of food benefits for cash – using the results of undercover investigations and EBT-based administrative case actions against retailers suspected of trafficking. The update of this key program performance metric will cover the period 2018-2020. In addition, the study will undertake two recommendations from a recent Government Accountability Office audit to evaluate (1) whether the factors used to identify stores for possible investigation could help address the bias in its sample, and (2) the accuracy of FNS’ assumption of the percentage of SNAP benefits that are trafficked by different types of stores.

Impact of State Laws and Procedures Regarding Business Integrity on SNAP Retailer

Authorizations: The Food and Nutrition Act provides FNS the authority to consider the business integrity and reputation of retailers who apply to be authorized to redeem SNAP benefits. A retailer may be denied authorization to participate in SNAP if found to lack the necessary business integrity, such as when there is evidence of a State conviction for a crime. Because States differ significantly when it comes to both characterizing and prosecuting a wide range of conduct they define as criminal, applying current SNAP regulations related to business integrity could result in disparate impacts on retailer authorization across State lines. This study will review and compile State laws related to business integrity and assess how they may impact SNAP retailer authorizations in differing ways.

Understanding Risk Assessment in SNAP Payment Accuracy: SNAP State Agencies develop their own algorithms to identify which cases might be a greater risk for payment error. Some States develop their methodologies in-house and others work with contractors to do this. This study would survey all 53 State Agencies to understand their differing approaches to risk assessment and identify which household characteristics States associate with payment error. The study will also collect additional data from up to six States to provide a greater understanding of the best ways to approach and utilize risk assessment.