

WIC Food Package Costs and Cost Containment

Client: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service

Project Overview

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides supplemental foods to low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and nonbreastfeeding postpartum women; infants; and children younger than 5 who are at nutritional risk. WIC State agencies (SAs) prescribe one of seven food packages—specifying which foods are authorized for purchase through the program—for each WIC participant. To ensure the best use of available funds, WIC SAs are expected to take steps to contain food package costs. Insight is examining cost containment practices used by WIC SAs, assessing their impact on key WIC goals, and identifying best practices that may be implemented across WIC SAs. The Food and Nutrition Service will use the results of this study to guide WIC SAs in adopting practices that effectively constrain WIC food costs while minimizing adverse effects on program outcomes such as participant satisfaction, retention, and consumption of foods issued through WIC.



This study has three main objectives:

1. Provide a national picture of food package cost containment practices across the 90 WIC SAs.
2. Examine the impact of at least six food package cost containment practices on eight interrelated program outcomes.
3. Identify at least four best practices that are effective at food package cost containment and that could be implemented in most WIC SAs.

The five complementary components for this study are as follows:

1. Collection and synthesis of information from WIC food lists, State plans, and policy documents on cost containment practices used in the 90 WIC SAs
2. Semistructured interviews with WIC SA directors to validate collected information and obtain input on rationale for implementing certain measures and not others
3. Telephone surveys with current and former WIC participants across 12 WIC SAs that issue benefits through electronic benefit transfer (EBT) to obtain feedback on satisfaction with WIC foods, consumption, preferences, and access to vendors
4. Collection and analysis of EBT data on WIC food selections and costs, and administrative data on WIC participant characteristics
5. Analysis of extant data on food prices and WIC vendors by type and size

Insight's methodology for examining effects of cost containment practices includes both a natural experiment approach—which involves comparing outcomes in WIC SAs that follow specific practices with outcomes in WIC SAs that do not follow those practices—and a within-State, quasi-experimental approach, which involves using information on whether a cost containment practice imposes constraints on WIC participant purchasing behavior.

Core Activities

Administrative Data Collection and Analysis; Data Extraction; Database Development; Administrative Cost Analysis; Document Reviews; In-Depth Interviews; Technical Expert Panel; Survey Estimation; Developing/Synthesizing Recommendations; Statistical Standards; Report Development and Presentation

Products

Final report (expected March 2019)