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WIC Works: A Cost-Effective Investment in Improving Low-Income Families' Nutrition and Health

Sound investments that reduce early childhood adversity can strengthen the foundations of physical and mental health, delivering lifelong benefits.² Extensive research finds that the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is just such a cost-effective investment, improving the nutrition and health of families with low incomes – leading to healthier infants, more nutritious diets and better health care for children, and subsequently to higher academic achievement for students.

As a result of the research documenting WIC's effectiveness, administrations and congresses of both parties have provided sufficient funding since 1997 to ensure that WIC can serve all eligible new and expecting parents, infants, and young children who apply. WIC's effectiveness reinforces why the Trump Administration and states must continue to do everything they can to keep these critical benefits flowing during the current federal government shutdown, and then provide enough funding to provide all eligible applicants with full benefits for the remainder of the fiscal year.

WIC provides nutritious foods, nutrition education, breastfeeding support, and referrals to health care and social services for millions of low-income families, and it plays a crucial role in improving lifetime health for new and expecting parents, their infants, and young children. Part of the nation's nutrition safety net for 50 years, WIC serves over 6 million adults, infants, and children in families with low incomes until their fifth birthday.

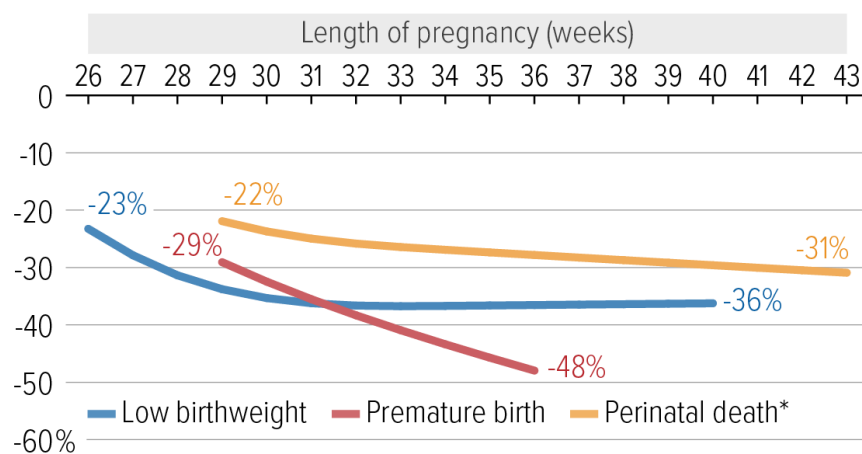
Over nearly five decades, researchers have investigated WIC's effects on key measures of child health such as birth weight, infant mortality, diet quality and nutrient intake, initiation and duration of breastfeeding, cognitive development and learning, immunization, use of health services, and childhood anemia. Comprehensive, systematic reviews of the research literature consistently demonstrate WIC's effectiveness.³

- **Healthier babies.** Nutrition influences health at every stage of life.⁴ Individuals who participate in WIC during pregnancy give birth to healthier babies who are more likely to survive infancy.

FIGURE 1

WIC Participation Reduces Risk of Adverse Birth Outcomes

Percent reduction in risk at each week of pregnancy



*Fetal or infant death 20 through 46 weeks after last menstrual period.

Source: Fingar *et al.*, "Reassessing the association between WIC and birth outcomes using a fetuses-at-risk approach," *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, published online August 16, 2016.

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- More nutritious diets.** WIC supports more nutritious diets and better infant feeding practices. WIC participants buy and eat more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products following the introduction of improved WIC food packages more closely aligned to current dietary guidance and increases to the cash value benefit for purchases of fruits and vegetables.
- More health care access.** Children in families participating in WIC are just as likely to receive immunizations as children in more affluent families and are more likely to receive preventive medical care than children in low-income families who don't participate in WIC.
- Stronger cognitive development.** Children whose parent participated in WIC while pregnant scored higher on assessments of mental development at age 2 than similar children whose parent did not participate, and they later performed better on reading assessments while in school.
- Narrowed inequities.** Participation in WIC may reduce racial and ethnic disparities in birth outcomes and breastfeeding.
- High participant satisfaction.** WIC has worked to modernize participants' experiences, including offering electronic benefits and remote services. Participant satisfaction is generally high, with some participants highlighting the services provided in WIC clinics. Caregivers especially

appreciate higher fruit and vegetable benefits available since 2021 and report improvements in the quality of their child's diet.

- **Neighborhood food access.** Improvements made to the WIC food packages since 2009 have contributed to healthier food environments in low-income neighborhoods, enhancing access to fruits, vegetables, and whole grains for all consumers regardless of whether they participate in WIC.

Poverty and adversity during early childhood can have lifelong consequences for physical, mental, and economic well-being. WIC supports sound nutrition and health at critical points in a child's development – in utero, during infancy, as a toddler, and during the early childhood years. An extensive body of research showing that WIC participation improves children's health and development highlights the importance of ensuring that all eligible parents and young children can get WIC benefits.

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² Clancy Blair and C. Cybele Raver, "Poverty, Stress, and Brain Development: New Directions for Prevention and Intervention," *Academic Pediatrics*, April 2016, [https://www.academicpedsjnl.net/article/S1876-2859\(16\)00026-7/fulltext](https://www.academicpedsjnl.net/article/S1876-2859(16)00026-7/fulltext).

³ Mary Kay Fox, William Hamilton, and Biing-Hwan Lin, "Effects of Food Assistance and Nutrition Programs on Nutrition and Health: Volume 3, Literature Review," U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, December 9, 2004, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details?pubid=46574>; Silvie Colman *et al.*, "Effects of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC): A Review of Recent Research," U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, January 2012, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/effects-special-supplemental-nutrition-program-women-infants-and-children-wic-review-recent-research>; Steven Carlson and Zoë Neuberger, "WIC Works: Addressing the Nutrition and Health Needs of Low-Income Families for More Than Four Decades," CBPP, January 27, 2021, www.cbpp.org/wicworks; Laura E. Caulfield *et al.*, "Maternal and Child Outcomes Associated with the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)," Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, April 2022, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK579797/>.

⁴ Early life experiences may also affect nutrition behavior later in life. A recent systematic review identified a 46 percent increase in the odds of adult obesity following exposure to multiple adverse events in childhood. See David A. Wiss and Timothy D. Brewerton, "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Adult Obesity: A Systematic Review of Plausible Mechanisms and Meta-Analysis of Cross-Sectional Studies," *Physiology & Behavior*, September 1, 2020, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32479804/>. A study of adults in Nevada suggests that fruit and vegetable consumption in adulthood may also be associated with the cumulative effects of multiple adverse childhood experiences. See Masako Horino and Wei Yang, "Impact of adverse childhood experiences and fruit and vegetable intake in adulthood," *Public Health Nutrition*, April 22, 2020, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32319883/>.