



Expanded Shopping Options Needed to Improve WIC Participants' Shopping Experience

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WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) provides supplemental food, nutrition education and referrals to over 6.7 million U.S. women, infants and children with low-income, who are at nutrition risk. WIC saves \$2.48 in public costs for every dollar spent by improving participants' health outcomes.^{1,2}

WIC food packages are tailored to participants' dietary needs and contain nutritious foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, protein-rich foods and dairy products. WIC foods are purchased with an electronic benefit (EBT) card from approximately 47,000 retailers. The package was modified in June 2024 to align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and recommendations from the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine.³

WIC EBT card purchases boost local economies by funneling billions of dollars into the retail sector and food systems.⁴⁻⁶ However, persistent shopping challenges contribute to unspent WIC benefits and may contribute to participant stigmatization and attrition.⁷⁻¹⁰ Studies suggest only 19-74% of WIC benefits are fully redeemed.^{6,8} In 2022, only 78% of eligible infants participates, with child participation decreasing from 66% of eligible 1-year olds to only 25% of eligible 4-year olds.¹¹ WIC shopping experience improvements are needed to enhance participants' agency and benefit utilization.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implement online purchasing options for WIC participants to streamline the acquisition of WIC-approved foods and enhance accessibility.
- Expand access to WIC purchases at farmers markets.

EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THESE RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations were informed by findings from a 2023 [survey](#) of 38,621 WIC participants—81% English and 19% Spanish speakers—from 19 states, one Indian Tribal Organization, and one US territory.¹² This brief also includes results from focus groups held in 2024 with 44 WIC participants from 16 states and one Indian Tribal Organization.¹³

KEY FINDINGS

WIC foods are the top reason for participation.

Participants value the WIC food package the most of any other component of WIC. Survey respondents said fruits and vegetables (93%) and other foods (89%) in the WIC food package were their top reasons for participating in WIC.



"The fruits and vegetables, they are definitely expensive. So, it's very helpful."
- English-speaking WIC participant

Participants experience stigma and difficulties shopping for WIC foods.

Most surveyed participants (90%) reported experiencing one or more difficulties when shopping for WIC foods. The most common problem was difficulty finding WIC foods (73%). Other common problems included misalignment between shelf labels and what could be purchased at the register (64%) and other shoppers (46%) or the cashier (46%) seeming annoyed with participants, indicating potential stigma.



2023 WIC Survey Respondents Shopping Problems



"Most bread sizes are the 20- or 24-ounce. The 16-ounce isn't very common, but that's what is WIC approved. There are only two vendors that stock it." - English-speaking WIC participant

"I've seen store staff being rude to other people and complain about, 'If you don't know what [WIC] is, then why are you trying to use it?' It's not fair. Because it's not always easy." - English-speaking WIC participant

Expanded shopping options for WIC are needed to reduce shopping barriers.

Survey respondents and focus group participants expressed interest in expanded WIC shopping options to facilitate improved shopping experiences. The top desire was the ability to use their WIC benefits to purchase food at farmers markets (85%). Online ordering for pick-up (73%) or delivery for no added cost (71%) or for an additional fee (45%) were other desired options.



"They have fresher eggs [at the farmers market], they are eggs that do not have as much contact with all the chemical sprays. I take my child, my child learns, and I also have nicer, healthier fruits, which do not have so many pesticides, and for me it is a contribution to the farmer's economy as well."
- Spanish-speaking WIC participant

"[Pre-ordering online] would be good, because there are times that the people at the cash registers are not all informed about what the WIC program is, others get confused, others don't know what it's like."
- Spanish-speaking WIC participant

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