

National- and State-Level Estimates of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Eligibility and WIC Program Reach in 2021 (Summary)

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers 16 nutrition assistance programs with the mission to increase food security and reduce hunger—in partnership with cooperating organizations—by providing children and low-income people access to food, a healthy diet, and nutrition education in a manner that supports American agriculture and inspires public confidence.

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides supplemental foods, nutrition education, breastfeeding promotion and support, and referrals to health care and social services to low-income, nutritionally at-risk pregnant women, new mothers, infants, and children up to age 5.

This analysis offers national and State-level estimates of the number of people eligible for WIC benefits and the percent of the eligible population participating in the average month of 2021, including estimates by participant category. The analysis also provides estimates by FNS region, by State and territory, by race and ethnicity, and, for the first time in this series of reports, by urbanicity.

Due to substantial updates to the estimation methodology, this report should not be directly compared with estimates from previous WIC eligibility reports.

Key Findings

- The average monthly WIC-eligible population totaled 12.13 million in Calendar Year (CY) 2021.
- In the average month of 2021, WIC served an estimated 51.2 percent of those eligible for WIC, which is slightly lower than the revised coverage rate in 2020 (52.0 percent).
- Coverage rates were highest for Hispanic (58.1 percent) WIC-eligible individuals and lowest for non-Hispanic White (44.2 percent) WIC-eligible individuals.
- Nationally, more than 50 percent of WIC-eligible SNAP and Medicaid recipients do not participate in WIC.

Methods

The national estimates are based on a methodology developed in 2003 by the Committee on National Statistics of the National Research Council.¹ The report's State-level estimates use a methodology originally developed by the Urban Institute. These methodologies use data from various sources, including the Community Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS-

ASEC), American Community Survey (ACS), and National Vital Statistics.

Last year, as part of producing the 2020 WIC eligibility estimates,² USDA undertook a comprehensive review of the methodology used to produce the WIC eligibility estimates and presented graphical results using the updated methodology. The 2021 estimates in this report are the first complete presentation of the results using this updated methodology. The report also describes the

¹ Ver Ploeg, M., & Betson, D. M. (Eds.). (2003). *Estimating eligibility and participation for the WIC program: Final report*. The National Academies Press.

² Gray K., Kessler C., Rozen J., Bryant A., Griffiths R., and Wakar B. (2022). National- and State-Level Estimates of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Eligibility and WIC Program Reach in 2020 (Online Graphics Only). Prepared by Insight Policy Research, Contract No 12319821F0054. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Grant Lovellette. Available online at: www.fns.usda.gov/research-analysis.

improvements made to the methodology in detail, including additional improvements made to the methodology since the publication of the 2020 estimates.

This report also includes new findings: national coverage rates by urbanicity and poverty status; participation rates by State and participant type and by State and race/ethnicity; State-level estimates by WIC participant category and race/ethnicity of children; WIC nonparticipation rates among Medicaid and SNAP participants; and improved confidence intervals.

Due to the changes in methodology, USDA re-estimated the results for 2016–2020 while producing 2021 estimates; estimates presented here should not be directly compared with previously published eligibility estimates.

Findings

The average monthly WIC-eligible population totaled 12.13 million in Calendar Year (CY) 2021 (Table 1), a small but statistically significant increase from the revised estimate of 12.08 million in 2020. Concurrently, program participation decreased slightly.

In the average month of 2021, WIC served an estimated 51.2 percent of those eligible for WIC, a small but statistically significant decrease from the revised estimate for 2020 (52.0 percent). The percentage of the eligible population that receives WIC benefits is the program’s “coverage rate.”

The coverage rate for WIC-eligible infants (78.0 percent) and nonbreastfeeding women (77.2 percent) was highest among WIC participant subgroups in 2021, while the coverage rate for WIC-eligible children (43.2 percent) continued to be lower than other groups. **In recent years, coverage rates for pregnant women have declined more rapidly than for other participant groups,** declining from 53.0 percent in 2018 to 43.7 percent in 2021.

Coverage rates were highest for Hispanic (58.1 percent) WIC-eligible individuals and lowest for non-Hispanic White WIC-eligible individuals (44.2 percent). Among pregnant women eligible for WIC, racial and ethnic differences in coverage rates were similar (50.8 percent among Hispanic, 44.2 percent among non-Hispanic Black, and 38.9 percent among non-Hispanic White WIC-eligible pregnant women).

More than 50 percent of WIC-eligible SNAP and Medicaid recipients do not participate in WIC. The WIC nonparticipation rate for all WIC-eligible SNAP participants was 54 percent, and the rate was 64 percent for all WIC-eligible Medicaid participants.

The estimated coverage rate for WIC-eligible individuals in metropolitan areas in the average month of 2021 was 56 percent, while the coverage rate for WIC-eligible individuals in nonmetropolitan areas was 23 percent. Of the 12.13 million individuals eligible for WIC, an estimated 10.46 million lived in metropolitan areas in 2021.

The relative order of coverage rates by participant category has remained consistent from CY 2005 to CY 2021, despite the re-estimation of the series. Across all years, coverage rates were highest for infants, followed by those for postpartum women. Coverage rates for children were consistently the lowest.

Coverage rates vary substantially by State, as demonstrated by the map below (Figure 1). Confidence intervals around estimates for States with small populations are larger than for other States, so differences between States and across years may be less pronounced than they appear in the map.

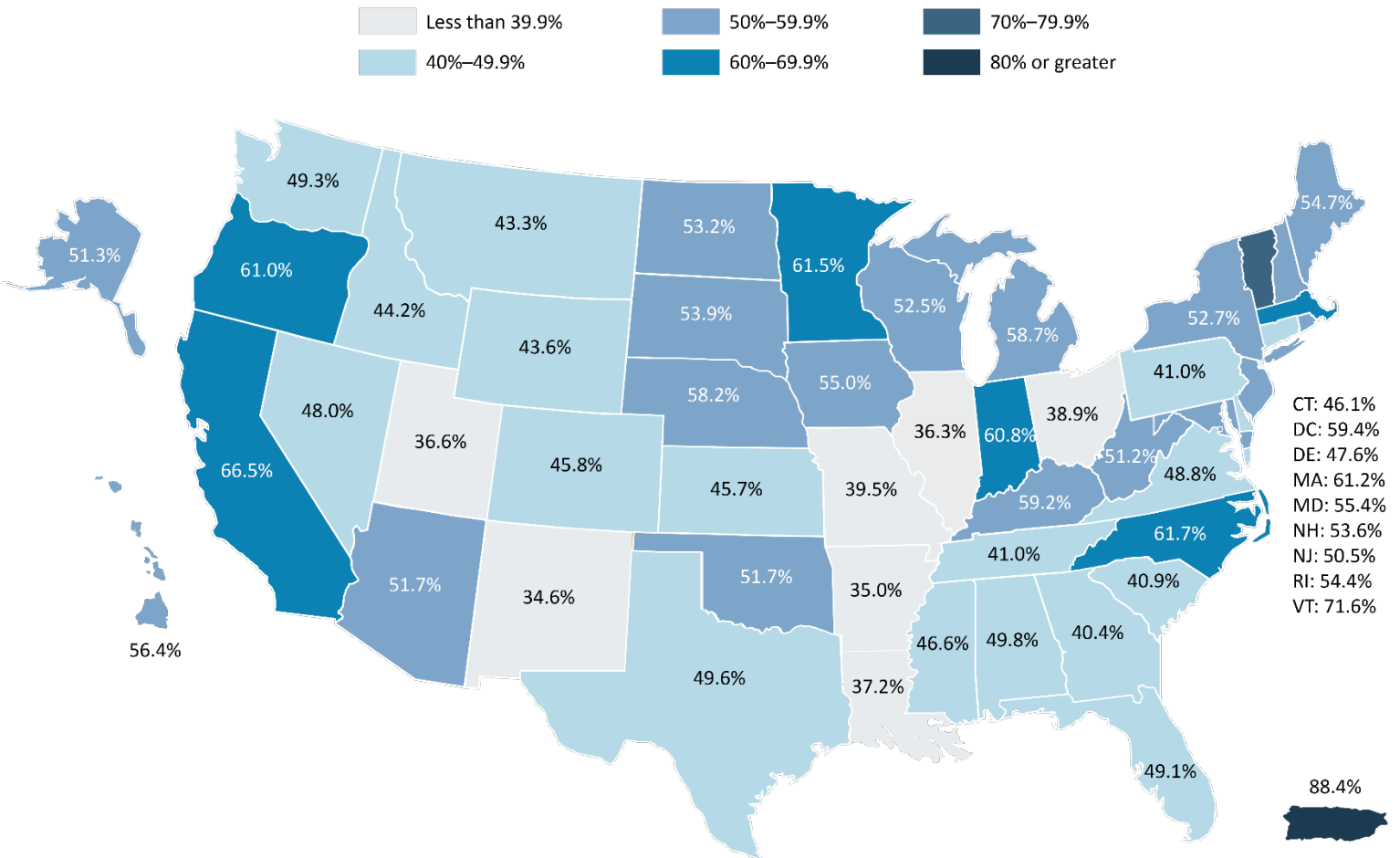
Table 1: WIC¹ Eligibility and Coverage Rate by Participant Category, Calendar Year 2021

WIC Participant Category	Number of Eligible Individuals (Millions)	Percentage of All Eligible Individuals	Number of Participating Individuals (Millions)	Coverage Rate ²
Infants	1.85	15.2%	1.44	78.0%
Total Children	7.85	64.7%	3.40	43.2%
Children Age 1	1.85	15.3%	1.19	64.3%
Children Age 2	2.05	16.9%	0.91	44.2%
Children Age 3	1.93	15.9%	0.80	41.4%
Children Age 4	2.01	16.6%	0.50	24.7%
Pregnant Women	1.13	9.3%	0.49	43.7%
Total Postpartum Women	1.31	10.8%	0.88	67.2%
Breastfeeding Women	0.80	6.6%	0.48	60.8%
Nonbreastfeeding Women	0.51	4.2%	0.39	77.2%
All Participants	12.13	100.0%	6.21	51.2%

¹WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

²The coverage rate is the percentage of eligible individuals in the respective participant category that receive WIC benefits.

Figure 1: WIC Coverage Rates for All Participants by State, Calendar Year 2021



WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

Note: WIC is administered by 89 State agencies, including 33 Tribal organizations. Due to the constraints of the underlying data sources, separate estimates for the Tribal organizations are not available; estimates for the Tribal organizations are included in the estimates for the geographic State in which the Tribal organization resides.

For More Information:

Kessler C., Bryant A., Munkacsy, K., and Gray K. (2023). National- and State-Level Estimates of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Eligibility and WIC Program Reach in 2021. Prepared by Insight Policy Research, Contract No 12319819A0005. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Grant Lovellette. Available online at: www.fns.usda.gov/research-analysis.