

Rural Hunger in America:

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION PROGRAM FOR WOMEN, INFANTS, AND CHILDREN



The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides low-income pregnant women, new mothers, infants, and children up to 5 years old with nutritious foods, nutrition education, and improved access to health care.

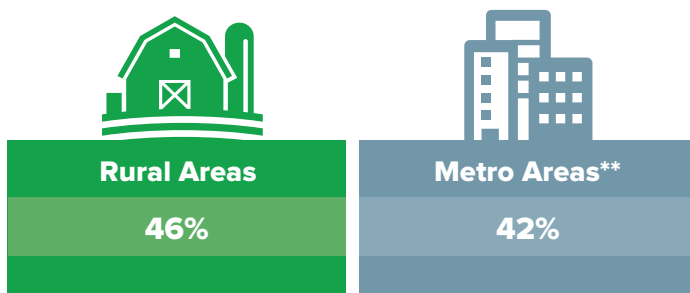
In 2017, WIC served 7 million participants each month. Food packages are prescribed to WIC participants based on their specific nutritional needs and include a variety of foods to supplement their diets. WIC-authorized foods include fruits and vegetables, milk, soy milk, yogurt, cheese, tofu, eggs, vitamin C-rich juice, iron-fortified cereal, tuna, peanut butter, beans, whole grain bread, tortillas, and rice, as well as infant formula, baby food, and infant cereal.

WIC is operated through local clinics by state WIC agencies and Indian Nations. WIC is vitally important in supporting the health and well-being of mothers, infants, and young children in rural communities. Along with other social safety net programs, WIC is a buffer against the harmful impacts of economic hardship and is responsive to increased need during economic downturns in rural communities.

Did You Know?

Many Rural Families Rely on WIC

The percent of income-eligible families with young children participating in WIC is higher in rural areas.*

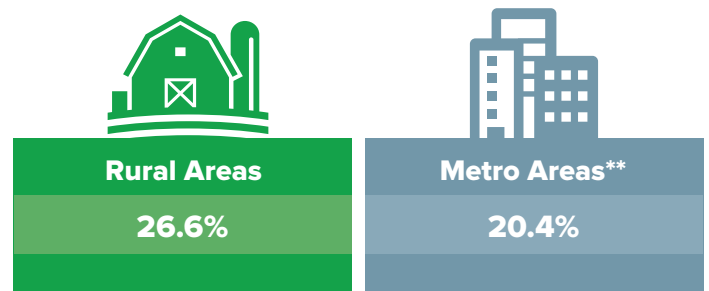


*The University of New Hampshire's Carsey School of Public Policy

**"Metropolitan Areas" are those contained within Metropolitan Statistical Areas, as delineated by the Office of Management and Budget; each of which contains at least one Census Bureau-delineated urbanized area of 50,000 or more people. "Rural Areas" consist of non-metropolitan areas.

Did You Know? Child Poverty is Worse in Rural America

Poverty rates for families with young children (under 6 years old) are higher in rural than in metropolitan areas.



Poverty and Food Insecurity in Rural Areas: The Need for WIC

The need for WIC in rural areas is high. Rural communities are hit harder by higher rates of poverty and food insecurity than metropolitan areas. Among households with children living outside of metropolitan areas, 1 in 5 was food insecure, compared to more than 1 in 7 in metro areas (15.9 percent). Higher rates of poverty and food insecurity jeopardize the health and development of pregnant women, infants, and children in rural communities.

In rural areas across America, WIC plays a vital role in improving the health and well-being of vulnerable mothers, infants, and children

by achieving the following:

- improves dietary intake, including increased consumption of fruits and vegetables, and reduced added sugar intake;
- protects against overweight and obesity;

- enhances health;
- improves birth outcomes, such as lowering the risk of preterm birth, low birth weight, and perinatal death;
- supports early learning and development;
- reduces household food insecurity; and
- supports family and community economic stability.

WIC Can Grow to Reach Many More Families

In rural areas, many eligible families not participating in WIC face significant barriers to reaching the much-needed benefits WIC offers. Barriers to WIC include common misconceptions about the eligibility of low-wage working families and children ages 2–5 years old, and concerns over stigma in small rural communities. A primary barrier to WIC participation in rural areas are the long distances families have to travel to WIC clinics for multiple visits, as well as to state-approved stores eligible to redeem WIC benefits.

Strategies to Increase Participation in WIC

The following key strategies can maximize WIC’s ability to support healthy mothers, babies, and young children in rural areas:

Target WIC outreach to rural communities to include positive messages that

- resonate with the values of local rural communities; for example, informing ranch and farm families that WIC is a U.S. Department of Agriculture program, or having the local church endorse WIC participation;
- address concerns around the travel and time costs of long trips to WIC clinics by promoting convenient locations, promising and delivering quick service, and featuring new options (such as online or mail-in nutrition education) for keeping the number of required in-clinic visits to a minimum; and
- emphasize the value of WIC services and the opportunity to talk with other mothers.

Did You Know?

The WIC food packages were revised in 2007 to align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The revised WIC food packages improve the health and nutritional quality of the foods in the program, including increasing participants’ choices, and expanding cultural food options. As a result, healthy food consumption and the availability of healthy foods in the food retail environment have increased. When local rural stores become certified WIC vendors, they must stock the WIC-healthy foods, including whole grains, fruits and vegetables, and low-fat milk. Often, this increases the availability of healthy foods in rural areas, which benefits both WIC and non-participants.

Reduce the time and expense of participating in WIC by reducing the distance WIC participants need to travel and the number of trips required by

- establishing mobile or rotating satellite WIC clinics to extend the reach of WIC in rural communities;
- offering WIC services in more convenient locations for parents, such as local Head Start programs and rural community health centers, and reducing the number of additional trips;



-
- scheduling WIC clinics at times that are convenient for residents in rural areas; and
 - keeping the number of required in-clinic visits to a minimum, including by offering WIC participants at least one option to complete a nutrition education requirement offsite via technology, such as online classes, mobile applications, or telehealth video conference or video chat (e.g., via Skype), as well as a conventional paper mail-in option for rural families without internet access.

WIC provides millions of low-income children benefits that are important for their healthy growth and development. Helping connect more eligible families to WIC supports better diets, healthier births, lower infant mortality, increased immunization rates, and access to regular health care. Good nutrition is important in all stages of life, but particularly so in the earliest years, when it serves as a critical building block for a healthy future.

FRAC's Resources

- [Rural Hunger in America: Get the Facts](#)
- [Impact of the Revised WIC Food Packages on Nutrition Outcomes and the Retail Food Environment](#)

This fact sheet is part of a series on rural hunger developed by the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) with the support of Smithfield Foods. FRAC and Smithfield Foods have teamed up to create the Rally Against Rural Hunger initiative to raise awareness about rural hunger and to connect eligible people across the country with federal food assistance programs so they may get the nutrition they need for their health and well-being.