

## FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE

# RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN FISCAL YEAR 2023

**Please Note:** This plan is a forecast of projects FNS expects to pursue in Fiscal Year 2023, but it is subject to modification without notice based on funding availability and program priorities.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	2
PROJECTS BY AGENCY PRIORITY TOPIC.....	3
STRENGTHEN PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS’ ABILITY TO EMBRACE HEALTHY DIETARY HABITS .....	3
ENSURE EQUITABLE AND CONSISTENT ACCESS TO FNS PROGRAMS FOR ELIGIBLE POPULATIONS .....	6
IMPROVE RESULTS AND THE CONSUMER EXPERIENCE THROUGH A CULTURE OF INNOVATION, PROCESS ANALYSIS, AND IMPROVEMENT .....	9
ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY TO STAKEHOLDERS THROUGH INTEGRITY, TRANSPARENCY, MONITORING, AND REPORTING .....	11

# FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN – FISCAL YEAR 2023

## INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) conducts a variety of studies, evaluations, and related activities that respond to the needs of policymakers and managers and help ensure that nutrition assistance programs achieve their goals effectively. This plan provides short descriptions of projects that are expected to be launched in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023. It reflects decisions by FNS's program and research staff and leadership on the best use of available research funding to meet current information needs that are aligned with Agency priorities to improve program efficiency, integrity, and nutrition. FNS developed this plan in consultation with the agencies of the USDA Research, Education, and Economics (REE) Mission Area.

In addition to consulting on the development of the annual Research and Evaluation Plan, REE staff members regularly participate as valued experts in the development of study design specifications and data collection plans and serve on advisory and technical panels for the studies. Projects also include work conducted through partnerships between FNS and USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS).

Through these partnerships, USDA ensures that we utilize the respective strengths and expertise of each agency in support of the USDA mission. Close collaboration across the Department ensures the studies included in the plan reflect the best science to inform evidence-based policy development in Federal nutrition assistance programs.

## PROJECTS BY AGENCY PRIORITY TOPIC

### STRENGTHEN PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS' ABILITY TO EMBRACE HEALTHY DIETARY HABITS

#### **Examining the Use of SNAP-Ed Priority Indicators and Targeted Interventions**

Beginning in 2016, States have used the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) Evaluation Framework and Interpretive Guide tool to help assess outcomes of SNAP-Ed interventions. The tool includes 51 indicators to measure the success of interventions, seven of which are priority indicators that States are encouraged to use. This study will examine 1) which priority indicators are being used across States; 2) which interventions target those indicators; 3) how those intervention outcomes are defined and measured; and 4) the quality of data collected from the interventions. This information will be used to better integrate SNAP-Ed results into the National Program Evaluation and Reporting System (PEARS). Data will be collected through a review of SNAP-Ed annual plans and reports and a survey to State agencies.

#### **Food Purchases of SNAP Households**

With the recent significant increases in SNAP benefit levels due to pandemic funding and the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) reevaluation, many have wondered how this may have affected SNAP households' food purchases. Unfortunately, publicly available data do not directly answer the question of what SNAP recipients buy with their benefits. In 2016, FNS released a study, "[Foods Typically Purchased by SNAP Households](#)," that compared the purchases of SNAP households to non-SNAP households using aggregated point-of-sale transaction data from a leading grocery retailer. FNS seeks to replicate this study or conduct a similar study using alternative food purchase data from large store chains, loyalty card companies, or other commercial sources that offer nationally representative information. Information obtained from this study can inform policy, nutrition education, and initiatives to enhance the nutrition security of SNAP participants.

#### **Alternatives to the Current Optimization Model**

The current methodology for reevaluating the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) uses an optimization model that selects quantities of foods and beverages in different categories to represent a nutritious diet, and subjects the entire selection to a set of constraints, including dietary needs, consumption patterns, calories, and food prices. An optimization model has been used since 1975. This study will commission a contractor to convene an expert panel to identify alternative approaches to reevaluating the TFP. The options could include significant changes to the current model, a different optimization model, or an entirely different methodology; all while considering the congressionally required elements of current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance. The recommendations will be operationalized to determine how the proposed alternatives will impact the value of the TFP as compared to the current optimization model.

### **“Ground Truthing” the Market Baskets Used in Developing the Thrifty Food Plan**

Behind the value of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) is a set of market baskets that represent amounts of foods and beverages from various categories to support a healthy diet for a congressionally defined representative family of four consisting of a man, a woman, and two young children. The TFP is mandated to be uniform for the contiguous 48 States regardless of the family’s State of residence, urbanicity, or access to food retailers. This study will assess whether it is feasible to purchase food from retailers to prepare healthy meals that meet the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025* (DGAs) with their SNAP allotments, which are a function of the TFP value. The feasibility of the TFP market baskets will be tested in both urban and rural areas in multiple regions of the contiguous 48 States by nutrition experts with a thorough understanding of the DGAs. The study could also test whether the TFP value can also meet the dietary needs of households with additional nutrition constraints, such as lactose free or gluten free diets. This study will provide evidence as to whether the market baskets behind the TFP represent both realistic quantities and actual prices of foods and beverages that can be purchased by families throughout the United States to prepare meals that meet the DGAs and can also inform future TFP reevaluations.

### **Systematic Reviews and Analyses Related to the TFP Optimization Model**

During the reevaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) in 2021, there were several topics for which there was insufficient evidence to warrant a change in methodology. FNS will continue to monitor these topics through systematic reviews and analyses. Planned activities include:

- Systematic review of the cost of household food loss/waste to inform the food waste adjustment factor
- Analyses to inform the TFP methods, such sensitivity and exploratory analyses to examine:
  - Online food and beverage transactions in the food prices data;
  - Assumptions about physical activity and body weight in the calculations of estimated energy requirement that correspond to the assigned calorie level of the Thrifty Food Plan Market Baskets;
  - Approach to determining higher and lower price food and beverage Modeling Categories for the optimization model;
  - How best to reflect current consumption patterns and diverse dietary preferences in the optimization model while still incorporating dietary guidance current at the time;
  - Potential improvements to account for mixed dishes (e.g., pizza, sandwiches, casseroles) in the methods supporting the Thrifty Food Plan’s Market Baskets development;
  - The units used in presenting the Thrifty Food Plan Market Baskets (i.e., the reexamination of units other than pounds and ounces); and,
  - How best to scale the Thrifty Food Plan to individuals and families not representing the reference family consisting of a man, a woman, and two children.

### **Designing a Pilot to Measure the Impact of Restricting SNAP Purchases**

Some stakeholders in the public health community argue that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) could more effectively support healthy food choices if restrictions were placed on the use of benefits for less healthy foods, especially sugar-sweetened beverages.

Others claim that such restrictions would be administratively burdensome, overly paternalistic, potentially stigmatizing, and likely ineffective. Many aspects of this debate can best be addressed with empirical evidence. Through an expert panel or interviews with key stakeholders, this study will help FNS better understand the requirements for operating and evaluating expanded SNAP food restrictions, preparing the Agency in the event that a demonstration or broader implementation is directed in the future. The evaluation strategy should include a methodology for capturing food purchases made by a SNAP household in a cash-only transaction.

### **Scratch/Fresh Food Preparation**

Due to increasing interest in serving more local and scratch-cooked foods in school meals, this project will collect data from School Food Authorities (SFAs) that do and do not prepare and serve these types of foods to help FNS better understand the influences on SFA capacity to prepare fresh foods as well as the challenges and benefits of scratch/fresh food preparation. Areas of investigation could include equipment, facilities, and infrastructure needs; labor and training considerations; financial implications; intersection with local foods; nutritional content of scratch-cooked foods; use of USDA tools and recipes; student and worker satisfaction; and marketing and public perception. This project will compare the various approaches SFAs take to serve fresh foods and examine differences across SFAs by size, urbanicity, and food preparation infrastructure (e.g., central kitchen, multiple production kitchens).

### **Evaluation of the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program**

It has been more than a decade since USDA evaluated the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP). That [study](#) found that FFVP students consumed more fruits and vegetables than nonparticipating students. Through 24-hour dietary recall interviews and other methods, this study will evaluate the impact of FFVP participation on student intake of fruits and vegetables and other outcomes of interest.

### **Using WIC EBT Data to Understand Participant Food Purchases and Preferences**

This project will build a system to collect Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) redemption and issuance data from EBT processors and State agencies in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) for analysis and monitoring by FNS. The data will be used to understand and describe WIC participant redemption patterns of individual food items, including infant formula, fruits and vegetables, and other WIC food categories. The final dataset will include both data on food category issuance and item level redemption necessary to calculate redemption rates. To the extent possible, issuance and redemption data will be linked with participant certification data to allow for analysis of redemption patterns by participant characteristics. These data will inform FNS and State Agencies about WIC participant purchase of foods included in the WIC food package, identifying popular and unpopular food items within the food package categories that could potentially drive participant satisfaction, participation, and retention in the Program. The information could inform nutrition education efforts and State Agency considerations in authorizing WIC foods. The information will also enable monitoring of

food redemption patterns when there are concerns about supply. Data from this effort are projected to be available starting in FY 2025. Because all 89 WIC State agencies will have statewide implementation of EBT by 2023, EBT data from all State agencies will be eligible for inclusion in this data system.

### **WIC Food Package Research Grants and Symposium**

In anticipation of several upcoming regulatory changes in WIC, including revisions to the food packages and removal of barriers to online ordering, these grants will provide resources to academic and other researchers to conduct pre/post evaluations of the changes to the WIC food packages to understand participant and vendor response to these changes as well as barriers to implementation. The grant projects will culminate in a public research symposium for all researchers to showcase food package research findings. This project will make available funds to researchers, including graduate and postdoctoral students. The research proposed may use data from FNS studies or other sources and may involve collaboration with an FNS researcher.

## **ENSURE EQUITABLE AND CONSISTENT ACCESS TO FNS PROGRAMS FOR ELIGIBLE POPULATIONS**

### **Support for Assessment of State Waivers for Demonstration Projects**

SNAP State agencies often seek waivers to test program changes that might increase the efficiency of SNAP or improve benefit delivery to eligible households. Any program change allowed through a waiver must be evaluated to determine efficacy and cost impacts. This funding will create a Blanket Purchase Agreement with multiple contractors to help provide support for evaluating demonstration project waivers through administrative data analysis, small scale data collection, and interviews with State Agency staff or SNAP participants.

### **Measuring SNAP Access, Trends, and Impacts (Microsimulation)**

This ongoing project supports several key analytic tools and analyses to address SNAP participation trends and impacts; generates annual reports on the characteristics, participation rates and patterns of participation; and supports the Agency's capacity to respond to proposed changes to SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs by estimating the cost and distributional impacts.

### **Benefit Redemption Patterns in SNAP: FY 2022**

FNS has conducted three previous studies – in Fiscal Years 2003, 2009, and 2017 – examining the patterns of SNAP benefit redemption by linking Anti-fraud Locator Using EBT Retailer Transactions (ALERT) data with SNAP Quality Control data, particularly related to the timing and amount of transactions, types of stores frequented, and the rate at which households exhaust their benefits and how these statistics vary by household type. This study will also identify the characteristics of households that redeem a significant portion of their SNAP benefits online. Past studies have found, that, on average, households redeem over three-quarters of their SNAP benefits in the first two weeks after issuance and over 95 percent by a month after issuance. This

study will replicate the prior studies using FY 2022 ALERT data to assess how redemption patterns changed during a time when SNAP EBT benefits were much larger than usual due to pandemic funding, including Emergency Allotments and Pandemic EBT for households with school-age children, and the Thrifty Food Plan reevaluation.

### **Longitudinal Study of SNAP Households**

This study will monitor how changes in SNAP policy and benefit levels affect SNAP households' participation status, food purchases, and diet quality. The proposed study will use a longitudinal design, following a nationally representative sample of SNAP households to collect data annually regardless of their continued SNAP participation status. Data collection will include food security, food purchases, dietary intakes, awareness and utilization of SNAP-Ed and SNAP Employment and Training (E&T), use of online purchasing or mobile payment, satisfaction with the recertification process and reporting, employment status, and utilization of other nutrition assistance and support programs. Data collected in the first round will be used as a baseline for future Thrifty Food Plan reevaluations. FY 2023 funds will support development of a comprehensive sampling plan, development and pretesting of survey instruments, completion of all materials for Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approval, and first round data collection, analysis, and reporting. Subsequent rounds of data collection will be funded with annual appropriated SNAP research funds.

### **Evaluation of Direct Certification with Medicaid Demonstrations**

Under the Direct Certification with Medicaid (DCM-F/RP) demonstrations, States use income data from Medicaid case files to determine student eligibility for free or reduced-price (F/RP) school meals. This study will collect data for School Year (SY) 2022-23 and/or 2023-24 on the number of students certified using Medicaid data in each demonstration State as well as administrative burden and costs associated with using DCM-F/RP. In addition, this study will seek to provide more precise estimates at the School Food Authority (SFA) level of the effects of the DCM-F/RP demonstrations on Identified Student Percentages (ISPs) in Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) schools and SFAs and student participation and resulting costs that could not be assessed in previous state-level evaluations.

### **WIC Eligibility and Coverage Estimates**

This project, the latest in a series, will develop a set of national and state-level estimates of the number of individuals eligible for WIC benefits in 2022 and the percent of eligible individuals participating in WIC. The report will present estimates by participant subgroup at the national level, and WIC coverage rates for all national and state-level estimates. This annual study examines how well WIC reaches eligible women, infants, and children and examines regional, racial, and ethnic differences in coverage to inform the Program's actions to ensure equity. Results are used in the budget process to support program management and to address program performance. Reporting will include short, focused reports on special topics. In addition, earlier release of a one-page document highlighting key national eligibility and coverage estimates will be explored.

### **Participant Access to WIC Approved Vendors**

WIC State agencies must ensure adequate participant access to supplemental foods through authorized WIC vendors. Determinations of whether vendors are needed for participant access are used in a variety of situations, including when a vendor applicant does not meet all selection criteria but must be authorized to ensure participant access, when a violative vendor may be disqualified or must be retained to ensure participant access, and when determining whether the Program must pay for certain types of EBT equipment. This proposal is a follow-on to analysis work being conducted in FY 2023 to examine participant access to authorized vendors. In order to address the gaps in access identified through the analysis work, this study will aim to establish a set of options for State agencies to consider when assessing and ensuring adequate participant access to authorized vendors.

### **Participation in WIC and Prevalence of Health Risks Associated with Maternal Mortality**

About 700 women in the United States die each year from pregnancy-related complications. More than 80 percent of these deaths can be prevented, and half occur from one week to one year after delivery. About three quarters of maternal deaths are caused by mental health conditions, hemorrhage, cardiovascular and coronary conditions, infection, thrombotic embolism, and cardiomyopathy based on a review of deaths in 36 States.<sup>1</sup> The proposed project will build on efforts FNS has been undertaking to examine WIC's relationship to this important public health concern, including a federal stakeholder meeting and a systematic review of existing studies. The project will use data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS) to examine the occurrence of health conditions that put a person at higher risk of complications during pregnancy and the postpartum period. The analysis will examine the prevalence of these conditions by participation in WIC overall and by race, ethnicity, and age. The findings from this analysis will inform actions to improve maternal health in groups at highest risk for maternal morbidity and mortality.

### **Recognizing Maternal Warning Signs for Morbidity and Mortality during Pregnancy and the Postpartum Period**

About 700 women in the United States die each year from pregnancy-related complications during pregnancy or up to one year after giving birth. More than 80 percent of maternal deaths are considered preventable, and early warning signs interventions have been shown to improve maternal health during this vulnerable period. This project will fund a cooperative agreement to an entity that will subsequently award subgrants to WIC State and local agencies. Subgrantees will implement and evaluate education, communication, and other activities aimed at assisting WIC clinic staff and pregnant and postpartum people with recognizing warning signs for maternal morbidity and mortality. Priority will be given to applicants that serve high-risk populations. The grantee will conduct an overall evaluation of the subgrant projects. The findings from these interventions will inform policies to improve maternal health and reduce maternal mortality, specifically in groups at highest risk for morbidity and mortality.

---

<sup>1</sup> Trost SL, Beauregard J, Njie F, et al. Pregnancy-Related Deaths: Data from Maternal Mortality Review Committees in 36 US States, 2017–2019. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, US Department of Health and Human Services; 2022.



### **FDPIR Characteristics Study**

For the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), the last nationally representative study was completed in 2016 using 2013 data. Since then, there has been a significant drop in national program participation, warehouse operations and distribution changes, and improvements in the types and variety of products offered in the food package. This updated study on household makeup and demographics, participant satisfaction, and characteristics of local operations will allow FNS to better target nutrition education efforts, funding, and potential policy changes.

### **Commodity Supplemental Food Program Characteristics Study**

Formal research is needed to better understand the seniors being served in the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), as the Program does not reach all communities or all eligible seniors. Basic information collection about participants is needed, including demographic characteristics, income levels, home environment (e.g., urbanicity; household composition), how participants obtain other food to meet nutrition needs, CSFP program access and duration of participation, among other topics such as satisfaction with the current food package offerings. Gathering information and assessing key characteristics of CSFP participants will help inform program decision-making and may yield improvements in customer service.

### **Evaluation Plan for the FDPIR 638 Self-Determination Demonstration Project**

Evaluation of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) Self-Determination Demonstration Project will allow FNS to better understand how the demonstration project was implemented and key successes, challenges, and lessons learned. The study will consider what worked well and what could be improved in future contracts in the self-determination and self-governance sphere. Key questions will include which foods were purchased, whether the demonstration was associated with higher participation, if there were observed economic impacts in local Tribal economies, links with nutrition education, how Tribes used the overall budget, and lessons observed from the contracting processes. The results will include ideas around best practices that could be applied to future demonstrations or expansion of the program.

## **IMPROVE RESULTS AND THE CONSUMER EXPERIENCE THROUGH A CULTURE OF INNOVATION, PROCESS ANALYSIS, AND IMPROVEMENT**

### **Evaluating the Interview Requirement for SNAP Certification**

During the Public Health Emergency (PHE), caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, SNAP State agencies had the option to seek a waiver of the interview with SNAP applicants at certification and/or SNAP participants at recertification. Many States may continue to waive the interview requirement for a time after the PHE ends. FNS released a study in 2015, [“Assessment of the Contributions of an Interview to SNAP Eligibility and Benefit Determination,”](#) that evaluated the elimination of both the certification and recertification interview in two States, Oregon and Utah. The study found mixed results: interviews may improve application timeliness and the likelihood that applicants will report earnings but eliminating the interview may reduce error rates and

churning. Since the prior study many changes have taken place in SNAP operations including interviews by contracted staff, video interviews, and data matching with employment databases. FNS seeks to revisit the role of the interview by conducting a larger set of demonstration projects and rigorously evaluating the impacts on client satisfaction, benefit accuracy, and administrative costs.

### **Quick Response Surveys for SNAP**

This project will field short-form surveys within quick timeframes to ensure prompt response to current SNAP policy and program needs. The goal is to provide a real-time understanding of State agency activities related to USDA priorities and in response to rapidly changing circumstances, such as those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The surveys will be OMB approved and the results will be presented via short memoranda to support evidenced-based decision-making.

**Guidance for SNAP Eligibility and Quality Control Interviews:** This study will develop specific guidance using human-centered design principles for conducting SNAP eligibility interviews and conducting interviews for households selected for Quality Control (QC) reviews for payment accuracy. The process will include observing interviews in multiple modalities (in-person, telephone, and video), designing questions and processes to gather needed information, and cognitively testing the approach with SNAP participants. In addition to the guides for interviewers, the study will also include development of a webinar on the study design and findings for a broader audience.

### **Child Nutrition (CN) Pulse Studies**

This study will provide contractor support for short surveys of School Food Authorities (SFAs), Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) sponsors, Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) operators, State agencies, and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) designed to collect timely information on topics of immediate interest or emerging concerns. Modeled after the Census Household Pulse Survey initiated by the U.S. Census Bureau during the COVID-19 pandemic, this effort will collect information from Child Nutrition program operators to examine policy-relevant information under a quick turnaround timeframe.

### **School Food Authority Food Distribution Study**

Many School Food Authorities (SFAs) face difficulties securing contracts with distributors to purchase food products, and this trend was exacerbated by the pandemic. This study will use administrative data, surveys, and interviews with SFAs and distributors to examine the characteristics and operations of the school food distribution and processing network (including USDA foods), describe the logistics of moving food to and within SFAs, and identify challenges and opportunities in the bidding and contracting process.

### **Cooperative Agreement to Study Child Nutrition Workforce Issues**

This cooperative agreement will fund a grantee to distribute subgrants to researchers studying topics relevant to FNS on the child nutrition workforce. Topics of interest might include

workplace satisfaction, workplace conditions, professional standards, training, collective bargaining, wages, and other related topics.

### **Child Nutrition Analytics and Modeling**

This effort intends to provide financial support for statistical analyses, modeling, and visual presentation of existing data to respond to legislative, budget, and policy questions critical to the Child Nutrition programs and to evaluate policy changes. Existing data sources include the FNS National Data Bank, FNS studies, and large national studies.

### **Quick Response Surveys for Child Nutrition and WIC**

In addition to its large-scale evaluations, FNS has built the capacity to field single-topic studies with shorter timeframes to respond to current policy and program needs. These quick response surveys will support these efforts to ensure FNS has multiple avenues available to support its practice of evidence-based decision-making.

### **Workgroup on Incorporating an Equity Lens in FNS Research**

This project will be designated for stakeholder engagement and review of research study planning, data collection, and dissemination of research findings. FNS will work with a steering committee to directly review and shape FNS research through the lens of participant engagement, lived experience, and equity with the goal of capturing how well participants overcome challenges and historical structural barriers to program participation. Groups and individuals to actively engage in study plan review may include, but are not limited to, program participants, program providers and staff; developers of interventions, innovations, or practices related to FNS programs; federal, state, or local leadership; individuals with lived experience or expertise related to FNS programs; and those in broader fields of study related to maternal and child health services, research, and evaluation, equity, and inequality.

## **ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY TO STAKEHOLDERS THROUGH INTEGRITY, TRANSPARENCY, MONITORING, AND REPORTING**

### **Assessment of Administrative Costs of Electronic Healthy Incentives Projects**

FNS will award cooperative agreements in Fiscal Year 2023 to support Electronic Healthy Incentives Projects (eHIP) to increase the purchase of healthy foods among Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants by providing incentives at the point of purchase through EBT integration. Following initial technology investments, one goal of eHIP is for the majority of funds to go to incentives rather than administrative costs, as compared to other forms of incentives, such as paper coupons, thereby better meeting the nutrition security goal of a targeted SNAP incentive program. This study will calculate the administrative costs of the eHIP cooperative agreements, compared to the amount of funding distributed as incentives, to see if the goal of a better balance between administrative costs and incentives is met.

### **School Nutrition Meal Cost and School Food Purchase Study**

This study, postponed from Fiscal Year 2022 due to the pandemic, has been expanded to include data collection on school food acquisitions. The School Nutrition and Meal Cost components will examine the nutritional content and quality of the meals offered and purchased at school, plate waste, the school nutrition environment, school food service operations, cost to produce school meals, as well as student participation, characteristics, satisfaction, and attitudes toward the school lunch and breakfast programs. The School Food Purchase components will provide national estimates of the type, quantity, dollar value and unit price of food acquisitions as well as overall changes in the composition of the entire school food market basket including food purchases for a la carte sales and the relative importance of donated USDA Foods. It will also examine the relationship between district characteristics, purchasing practices, and food costs. Additionally, this study will develop estimates of the cost of school meals for the outlying areas of Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Alaska, and Hawaii.

### **Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Adult Day Care Centers Characteristics Study**

While FNS has collected considerable data on childcare centers and family day care homes participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), less is known about adult day care centers. This study will collect baseline descriptive data through a nationally representative survey of Adult Day Care Centers participating in CACFP. Baseline information will include data on populations served, funding sources, meal service, and community-based programming (options centers provide and commonly offered activities). In addition, the study will compile extant data on adult day care centers in general (how many operate in the country, target populations, etc.) to identify potential service gaps. If feasible, the study will also collect data from nonparticipating centers through focus groups and/or interviews to identify potential barriers to participation.

### **Child Care Literature Review and Extant Data Analysis**

Almost two billion Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) meals are served by participating childcare providers each year. However, many childcare providers do not participate in CACFP. Through a literature review and analysis of existing data sources, such as national surveys or State administrative data, this study will summarize what is known about childcare facilities in general, operational characteristics such as days/hours of operation and hours in care, and operational aspects of meal services including funding sources if not participating in CACFP. This effort will aim to identify characteristics of providers that do not participate in CACFP with an eye towards identifying barriers to participation.

### **Study of Child Nutrition Benefits Delivery Modernization**

The last decade has seen increased use of Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards to deliver Child Nutrition benefits through programs such as the Summer EBT for Children (SEBTC) Demonstrations, which provide benefits to low-income children during summer months, and Pandemic EBT (P-EBT), which has provided benefits to children during school closures throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. While these programs have shown promise toward reducing food insecurity among households with children, SEBTC Demonstrations have been limited in scope, and, in some areas, P-EBT has faced challenges delivering benefits quickly and

efficiently. This study will use a variety of qualitative methods – focus groups and listening sessions as well as a literature review and environmental scan – to draw on lessons learned from implementation of these programs and other similar programs to evaluate alternatives to deliver Child Nutrition benefits to households facing periods of planned or unplanned closures of schools or childcare facilities. These alternatives will focus on ways to quickly and efficiently address potential food insecurity for children and households during periods of school closure, while also being responsive to issues of program integrity.

#### **WIC Certification Error Estimates – Aging for Payment Integrity Information Act Reporting**

This project conducts the annual aging of data on WIC certification errors for reporting the USDA financial reports. It helps fulfill the requirements of the Payment Integrity Information Act (PIIA) of 2019. Data from the most recent national survey of WIC participants are adjusted annually using data from the census of WIC participant administrative records contained in the WIC Participant and Program Characteristics report series and other WIC administrative data.

#### **WIC Vendor Management Study**

This study will test a methodology for assessing improper payments made by authorized WIC vendors, as defined by the Payment Integrity Information Act (PIIA) of 2019. The goal is to develop a valid, reliable measure of vendor improper payments required as part of compliance with PIIA. The nature of vendor error and improper payments is fundamentally different for transactions occurring with EBT compared to paper WIC food instruments, as described in a recent FNS study of vendor management. This study will 1) develop and test a revised method, including potential utilization of Food Delivery Portal (FDP, formerly known as TIP) data, to measure WIC vendor improper payments in EBT, incorporating recommendations from a recent FNS study; and, if feasible, 2) conduct a nationally representative study to estimate WIC vendor improper payments to fulfill the PIIA reporting requirements.

#### **WIC Participant and Program Characteristics Report 2024**

Federal regulation requires a biennial report of WIC participant characteristics of women, infants, and children enrolled in WIC through 89 State Agencies. This project will generate two reports and supporting datasets using information from state management information systems based on a census of WIC participants. One report will include information on participant income, assigned nutrition risk, weight status, anemia prevalence, breastfeeding initiation and duration, demographic characteristics, and participation in the program by category (i.e., pregnant, breastfeeding and postpartum women; infants; and children) within each priority level and by migrant farmworker households. Information will be reported at the national and WIC State Agency level. The second report will summarize types and quantities of foods prescribed to participants and the estimated cost of the foods provided through WIC. The reports provide a wide range of information on WIC participants to inform measures of program performance.

#### **Building Longitudinal State Agency Files of WIC Visits**

This project will expand on the recently completed pilot in one state to build a longitudinal file of a cohort of infants enrolled in WIC using Management Information System data. The project will also explore starting a cohort with prenatal enrollees. Once the longitudinal record is built, initial

analyses will examine changes in nutrition and health status with time in WIC. Initial analyses will also compare different approaches to measure retention in WIC, including comparison to approaches using cross-sectional data files. This project will inform evaluation of WIC and has the potential to inform the evaluation of WIC Modernization and Innovation efforts.

### **WIC Pulse Survey**

Modeled after the Census Household Pulse Survey initiated by the U.S. Census Bureau during the COVID-19 pandemic, this project will develop a mechanism to field quick surveys to a national sample of WIC participants to provide real-time data on participant awareness, experiences, and attitudes towards key policy changes and events over the next few years (e.g., revisions to WIC food packages, online shopping, WIC Modernization and Innovation initiatives, supply chain disruptions, unforeseen emergencies, and other issues). The data will not provide depth on any one issue and therefore not replace more rigorous studies of these changes. Rather, the data will provide a pulse on key issues to give FNS an immediate stream of data to understand the rollout of policies and response to program needs.

### **WIC Analysis and Modeling**

This funding will provide financial support for a variety of analyses conducted to respond to legislative, budget and policy questions critical to WIC. The funding may support additional analyses using existing data from large nationally representative studies. A new Blanket Purchase Agreement (BPA) is needed for FY 2023.