The Impact of Federal Policy Changes and Initiatives on Breastfeeding Initiation Rates and Attitudes Toward Breastfeeding Among WIC Participants

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ABSTRACT

To explore the effects of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) on participants’ breastfeeding (BF) practices, studies that use large national samples are warranted. The US Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service funded several studies that leveraged national samples of WIC agencies, sites, and participants to evaluate how WIC affects BF outcomes among its participants. This report integrates findings across multiple Food and Nutrition Service–funded studies to describe important program benefits and how the program and its benefits supported positive attitudes and beliefs toward BF, as well as higher rates of BF initiation. The report concludes with policy implications and suggestions for future research.

Key Words: WIC, breastfeeding, food package, initiation, duration (J Nutr Educ Behav. 2017;49:S207-S211.)
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INTRODUCTION

Among the myriad of short-term and long-term health benefits breastfeeding (BF) may confer, children who are breastfed are less likely to develop infections during infancy and chronic diseases later in childhood. Breastfeeding also reduces a women’s risk for breast and ovarian cancers and type 2 diabetes. Given these important health benefits, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that infants breastfeed exclusively for the first 6 months and for at least the first 12 months of age. In its efforts to safeguard the nutrition and health of low-income women, infants, and young children, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides comprehensive nutrition education and BF support to enrolled participants. In 2014, 9.3 million individuals were certified to receive WIC benefits; in 2015, nearly half of all infants in the US participated in WIC. To support WIC in providing evidence-based services, the Office of Policy Support within the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) at the US Department of Agriculture administers a portfolio of studies to evaluate program participation, operations, costs, and regulatory impact, as well as participants’ attitudes, behaviors, and health outcomes.

This report synthesizes findings from a number of recent FNS studies to document the multifaceted impact of WIC on BF practices (Table). The largest of these efforts is the WIC Infant and Toddler Feeding Practices Study-2 (WIC ITFPS-2), a longitudinal study involving a nationally representative sample of 4,367 mother–infant dyads observed from enrollment in WIC in the prenatal or early postpartum period through the child’s fifth birthday. The WIC ITFPS-2 collects feeding practice and dietary data from study participants every 2–6 months using 24-hour dietary recalls and telephone interviews. Findings from the current study are compared with those from the WIC Infant Feeding Practices Study-1 (WIC IFPS-1) (n = 874 mother–infant dyads), an FNS-funded study conducted in the mid-1990s; however, owing to data limitations, significance testing between the 2 studies is not possible. Nonetheless, much of the study design, methods, and instruments from WIC ITFPS-2 were modeled after WIC IFPS-1; thus, comparisons between the studies can be used to demonstrate the magnitude of improvements observed over the past 2 decades.

The WIC Breastfeeding Peer Counseling Phase II Study (BFPC-II), which was conducted in 2014, provided updated information on the implementation of the Loving Support peer counseling (PC) program and made comparisons with a previous study conducted in 2008.
The results showed how significantly increased funding in 2010, and to a lesser extent 2014, contributed to access to and provision of BF support and PC services.

The WIC Breastfeeding Policy Inventory (WIC BPI), which was conducted in 2013, used a 2-phase online survey to collect data on BF policies and practices that SAs and LAs used to promote and support BF.

In addition to these evaluation-oriented data collection efforts, FNS also publishes the biennial WIC Participant and Program Characteristics report, which uses a census of administrative data from all women, infants, and children certified to receive WIC benefits in April of the study year. The WIC Participant and Program Characteristics report series includes administrative data on BF initiation and duration going back to 1998, which allows the analysis and monitoring of trends in program and participant measures over time.

This article uses several large national studies to highlight findings on important benefits of WIC; changes in attitudes toward, beliefs about, and intentions to breastfeed; and BF initiation and duration rates among mothers enrolled in WIC. Policy implications of these findings are made within the context of BF

<table>
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<th>Study Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>WIC Infant and Toddler Feeding Practices Study-2 (WIC ITFPS-2, or Feeding My Baby Study)</td>
<td>Westat</td>
<td>5-y longitudinal study of nationally representative sample of infants participating in WIC</td>
<td>2013–present</td>
<td>27 WIC state agencies (SAs) • 80 local WIC sites • 4,367 mother–infant dyads</td>
<td>State and local agency program characteristics • Dietary intake and feeding practices of infants/children enrolled in WIC</td>
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<td>WIC Breastfeeding Peer Counseling Phase II Study (BFPC-II)</td>
<td>Abt Associates</td>
<td>Descriptive survey that provided updated information on implementation of Loving Support PC program and made comparisons with study conducted in 2008</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>50 WIC SAs (not including ITOs or territories) • WIC PC 2012 study data</td>
<td>Program operations and allocation of resources • SAs’ role in BF promotion • LA Loving Support program data from WIC SAs</td>
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<tr>
<td>WIC Breastfeeding Policy Inventory (WIC BPI)</td>
<td>Mathematica Policy Research</td>
<td>A 2-phase online census survey of SAs (including ITOs and US Territories) and LAs</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>82 WIC SAs, including 50 states, DC, 3 territories, and 28 ITOs • 1,662 WIC LAs</td>
<td>BF policies and practices • BF measures in use by SAs and LAs</td>
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<tr>
<td>WIC Participant and Characteristics Report</td>
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<td>Census of individuals enrolled in WIC in April of the reporting year, using state agency-collected enrollment data to provide information on participant income and nutrition risk characteristics, estimate breastfeeding initiation rates for WIC infants, and describe WIC members of migrant farm worker families.</td>
<td>2014 (report generated biennially since 1992)</td>
<td>90 WIC SAs, including 50 states, DC, 5 territories, and 34 ITOs • 9,303,253 WIC certified enrollees (from April, 2014)</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

BF indicates breastfeeding; ITO, Indian Tribal Organization; LA, local agency; PC, peer counseling; SA, state agency; WIC, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

The table provides a summary of recent studies investigating WIC’s impact on BF practices.
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