WIC Research at ERS

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The views expressed today are mine and should not be attributed to the Economic Research Service or USDA
Economic Research Service (ERS)

• Federal statistical agency

• Staff is comprised of over 250 researchers (mostly economists)

• Provides research to inform decision makers

• Conducts research on a wide range of topics reflecting the mission of USDA
ERS Research Topics

• Food and Nutrition

• Agricultural Economy

• Food Safety

• Global Markets and Trade

• Resources and Environment

• Rural Economy
Outline

• Completed ERS research (2016)

• Completed ERS-funded research (2016)

• Ongoing research
Research Completed by ERS in 2016
Where Do WIC Participants Redeem Their Food Benefits? An Analysis of WIC Food Dollar Redemption Patterns by Store Type

Laura Tiehen and Elizabeth Frazão
Percent of WIC redemptions by store type, FY 2012

- Super stores
- Supermarkets
- WIC-only stores
- Convenience stores
- Medium grocery stores
- Small grocery stores
- Compination grocery/other
- Large grocery stores
- Missing retail
- A-50 stores
- Commissaries
- Other retail

Percent of WIC redemptions is shown on the y-axis, with the percentage range from 0 to 45 on the x-axis.
Percent of WIC redemptions by store type, FY 2012

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Percent
Findings:

• Private-label cereals are less expensive than national brands

• Restrictions on number of national-brand cereals allowed has no effect

• Larger size boxes tend to cost less

• Cold cereals are typically less expensive if bought from large grocery stores, super stores, or supermarkets

• Allowing participants to use their benefits at a wide range of store types may have little impact on WIC’s overall food costs
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Percent
2016 ERS-Funded Research

“Did Revisions to the WIC Program Affect Household Expenditures on Whole Grains?”

Change in WIC households' expenditures for grain products after the 2009 revisions in the WIC food packages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Whole Grain</th>
<th>Refined Grain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
<td>-13%</td>
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Change in WIC households' expenditures for grain products after the 2009 revisions in the WIC food packages

Results "suggest that moderate innovations in the design of food assistance programs can lead to beneficial dietary choices."
ERS-Funded Research-cont.

“The Healthfulness of Food and Beverage Purchases After the Federal Food Package Revisions: The Case of Two New England States”


Findings:

- After the WIC revisions, purchases of healthy food increased and less healthy foods declined
- Improvement in beverage purchases
- “Efforts to encourage healthy eating by people receiving federal food assistance are paying off”
Ongoing Research at ERS

The Availability and Demand for Whole Wheat Bread Among WIC Households

— Availability of WIC-size loaves (16 oz) in stores

— How often WIC households purchase whole wheat bread with WIC benefits

— Whether WIC households purchase whole wheat bread with their own money
Ongoing Research at ERS-cont.

The Economics of Food Vendors Specialized to Serving the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program

– Study patterns of WIC benefit redemption in California

– Estimate the effect of disallowing A-50 vendors on:
  » Participant access to WIC vendors
  » Redemption costs
Ongoing Research at ERS-cont.

WIC and the Retail Markup of Infant Formula
Example of cost components for a can of infant formula in WIC

Percent of retail cost

- Retail markup
- Net price
- Rebate
- Wholesale price

Cost to WIC
Ongoing Research at ERS-cont.

WIC and the Retail Markup of Infant Formula

— How big is the retail markup for the WIC brand of formula?

— Do retailers charge a larger markup for the WIC brands of formula?
Duke-UNC BECR Center

• Center for Behavioral Economics and Healthy Food Choice Research (BEWR)

• Collaboration between Duke and U. of North Carolina

• Funded jointly by ERS and FNS

• Draws on research from economics and cognitive psychology to better understand consumer behavior and decision making

• Conducts research on ways to promote healthy and cost-effective food choices by WIC participants

• Session on “Improving the Retail Experience Using Behavioral Economics and EBT Data” in Philadelphia
For more information:

  (Under “Topics,” click on “WIC”)

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