

# WIC Improves Child Health and School Readiness

## > A Sound and Effective Investment

WIC is a sound and effective investment in children's health and our nation's future, yet only about 57% of those eligible for WIC are enrolled.<sup>1</sup>

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides participants with access to scientifically-selected, nutrient-rich foods, information on healthy eating and referrals to health care. The program serves low-income (at or below 185% of the U.S. Poverty Income Guidelines) pregnant women, new mothers, infants and children up to age five who are determined to be at nutritional risk<sup>2</sup> by a health care professional.

Economic research has shown that every \$1.00 spent on WIC results in savings of between \$1.77 and \$3.13 in health care costs in the first 60 days after an infant's birth.<sup>3</sup> The cost savings are due in part to WIC's effectiveness in reducing rates of low birth weight,<sup>4,5</sup> and improving rates of childhood immunization.<sup>6</sup> The program has the highest rating possible from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's Program Assessment Rating Tool, an assessment based on a program's goals, results, and management. WIC's superior rating is attributable to its measurable impacts on key health outcomes, the efficient use of program funds and its success in achieving long-term performance goals.

## > WIC Improves Child Health and Developmental Outcomes

New research from Children's HealthWatch shows that:

- **Children under age three who receive WIC are more likely to be in good health than children who are eligible but do not receive WIC due to difficulties accessing the program.** They are also more likely to be food secure and have a healthy height and weight for their age.
- **WIC has its most protective effect on children younger than 12 months old.** It is during this period that young children's brains more than double in size if the nutritional building blocks are provided.
- **WIC decreases the risk of developmental delays in young children.** Children are considered at risk for developmental delays when there are significant concerns about their ability to speak and understand language, their fine and gross motor skills, social/emotional behavior, and/or ability to learn in school. By reducing the risk of developmental delay, WIC helps children to be ready to learn when they enter school.

## > Protecting America's Future

Every five years, Congress reauthorizes WIC as part of the Child Nutrition Reauthorization. The upcoming reauthorization is an opportunity to improve the program's nutritional benefits and enhance access to the program for eligible families. Women interviewed by Children's HealthWatch reported a range of barriers to accessing the program, including limited office hours at some WIC offices, difficulty getting to the WIC office to pick up vouchers and lack of a permanent address.

## Summary of Findings

- WIC decreases the risk of costly health problems and developmental delays for young children.
- Children who are eligible for but not receiving WIC are more likely to be underweight, in poor health and at risk for developmental delays.
- WIC is especially effective at protecting the health of children younger than 12 months.

*In order to support and protect the health and development of young children, we recommend that Congress:*

- Direct the Secretary of Agriculture to provide the full complement of WIC foods recommended by the Institute of Medicine, as current food packages do not meet suggested levels of fruits and vegetables.
- Fund WIC at a level that adequately supports states in meeting the needs of eligible women, infants, and children.
- Increase funding for nutrition services and administration. Current funding is insufficient to maintain services as demand for vouchers increases due to the recession.
- Ensure that the program reaches more of the eligible population by mandating coordination between local WIC offices and hospitals with significant maternity services.
- Accommodate the needs of working mothers by extending WIC office hours and allowing some nutrition education to be done electronically.
- Decrease barriers to application and reapplication with increased funding for outreach.

## Conclusion

**Children cannot wait for the recession to end. Their bodies and brains need to grow now. If they do not receive adequate nutrition, many windows of opportunity for their optimal growth and development will be permanently closed. As members of Congress consider reauthorization of the WIC program, we urge them to see WIC as an investment not only in our children but in our economic future.**

*This Policy Action Brief was prepared by Annie Gayman, Research and Policy Fellow, Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba, MPH, Research and Policy Director, John T. Cook, PhD, Principal Investigator, Elizabeth L. March, MCP, Executive Director, and Sharon Coleman, MS, MPH, Statistical Analyst.*

*Children's HealthWatch is a non-partisan pediatric research network that carries out research on the impact of economic conditions and public policies on the health of children under age three. For more than a decade, Children's HealthWatch has interviewed families with young children in emergency departments and urgent care clinics in five hospitals in Baltimore, Boston, Little Rock, Minneapolis and Philadelphia that serve largely low-income families. Data are collected on a wide variety of issues including demographics, food security, public benefits, caregivers' health and earnings, housing, home energy conditions and children's health status and developmental risk.*

<sup>1</sup> USDA, Food and Nutrition Service

<sup>2</sup> "Nutritional Risk" is defined as:

1) Medically-based risks such as anemia, under/overweight, and history of pregnancy complications for mothers

2) Dietary risks, such as inappropriate nutrition habits or inability to meet dietary guidelines for mothers and their children

<sup>3</sup> USDA, Food and Nutrition Service

<sup>4</sup> Washington State WIC Nutrition Program, [http://www.doh.wa.gov/cfh/wic/health\\_effects.htm](http://www.doh.wa.gov/cfh/wic/health_effects.htm)

<sup>5</sup> United States General Accounting Office, <http://archive.gao.gov/d32t10/146514.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> USDA, Food and Nutrition Service

