

Women and Children Participating in WIC

DEFINITION

Women and children participating in WIC is the percentage of eligible women, infants, and children enrolled in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

SIGNIFICANCE

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) is a federally funded preventive program that provides participants with nutritious food, nutrition education, and referrals to health care and social services. WIC serves pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, and children under age five living in low-income households. Any individual who participates in SNAP, RIte Care, Medicaid, or Rhode Island Works is automatically income-eligible for WIC. Participants also must be at nutritional risk to qualify. This can include inadequate nutrition, or medical risks such as anemia or high-risk pregnancy.^{1,2}

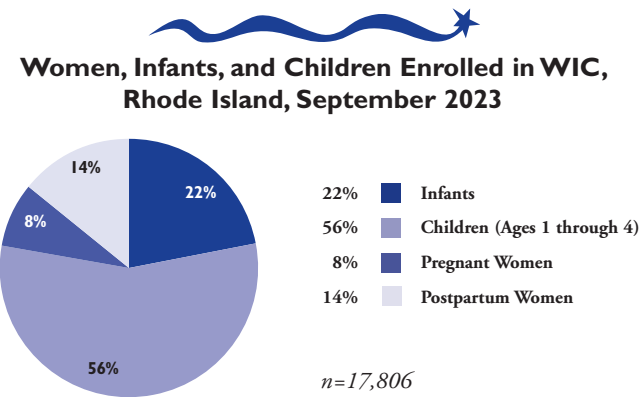
WIC improves the quality of participants' diets and promotes healthy eating habits. Studies have shown that WIC participants access more nutritious foods, including more produce, whole grains, and low-fat dairy. WIC participation also may decrease

household food insecurity (families that do not have regular access to enough food for an active, healthy life). Food insecurity in early childhood can lead to impaired cognitive, behavioral, and psychosocial development, and can limit academic achievement. Pregnant women also have special nutritional needs that influence pregnancy outcomes and the health of their children.^{3,4,5}

WIC participation has been shown to reduce infant mortality, improve birth outcomes (including reducing the likelihood of low birthweight and prematurity), improve cognitive development, reduce risk of child neglect and abuse, increase child immunization rates, and increase access to preventive medical care.^{6,7}

Revisions to the WIC food package that were implemented in 2009 increased access to a wider variety of nutritious foods, increased state flexibility to provide culturally appropriate foods, and strengthened breastfeeding support.^{8,9} In Rhode Island in Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2023, 35% of infants participating in WIC were breastfed, and 65% of infants were fully formula fed.¹⁰

In 2020, WIC began providing an EBT (electronic benefit transfer) card called eWIC to all Rhode Island users.¹¹



Source: Rhode Island Department of Health, WIC Program, September 2023.

★ **Infants and children ages one through four comprised more than three-quarters (78%) of the population served by WIC in September 2023 in Rhode Island. Women accounted for over one-fifth (8% pregnant and 14% postpartum) of the population served.**¹²

★ **In September 2023, 4% of WIC participants in Rhode Island were American Indian, 2% were Asian, 18% were Black, 64% were white, and 12% identified as another race or more than one race. Sixty percent of WIC participants identified as Hispanic. Hispanic women and children may be included in any race category.**¹³

★ **All four of the core cities had participation rates at or exceeding the statewide participation rate of 46% in September 2023: Pawtucket (46%), Woonsocket (50%), Providence (58%), Central Falls (59%).**¹⁴

★ **WIC is not an entitlement program (there is not enough funding for all eligible women and children to participate). Congress determines funding for WIC annually.¹⁵ Rhode Island received \$20.1 million in federal WIC funding during FFY 2023, slightly higher than the \$19.8 million received in FFY 2022.**¹⁶

★ **The WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) improves participants' intake of fresh fruits and vegetables by enabling participants to purchase produce at authorized local farmers' markets using WIC benefits.¹⁷ In Rhode Island, 7,686 WIC participants purchased fresh produce at 65 farmers' markets through the FMNP in FFY 2023.**¹⁸

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Table 14.

Women, Infants, and Children Enrolled in WIC, September 2023

CITY/TOWN	ESTIMATED NUMBER ELIGIBLE	NUMBER ENROLLED	% OF ELIGIBLE ENROLLED
Barrington	178	33	19%
Bristol	295	105	36%
Burrillville	420	90	21%
Central Falls	1,902	1,118	59%
Charlestown	157	51	33%
Coventry	754	208	28%
Cranston	2,991	1,369	46%
Cumberland	718	266	37%
East Greenwich	130	38	29%
East Providence	1,520	641	42%
Exeter	107	29	27%
Foster	122	28	23%
Glocester	157	37	24%
Hopkinton	186	141	76%
Jamestown	34	7	21%
Johnston	1,057	418	40%
Lincoln	558	185	33%
Little Compton	40	9	22%
Middletown	407	167	41%
Narragansett	131	38	29%
New Shoreham	32	0	0%
Newport	709	400	56%
North Kingstown	454	123	27%
North Providence	1,174	380	32%
North Smithfield	231	103	45%
Pawtucket	4,576	2,085	46%
Portsmouth	239	81	34%
Providence	13,619	7,886	58%
Richmond	163	12	7%
Scituate	175	26	15%
Smithfield	286	75	26%
South Kingstown	410	119	29%
Tiverton	301	95	32%
Warren	245	101	41%
Warwick	2,009	680	34%
West Greenwich	100	20	20%
West Warwick	1,189	462	39%
Westerly	541	168	31%
Woonsocket	2,990	1,500	50%
Unknown	670	-	0%
Four Core Cities	23,087	12,589	55%
Remainder of State	18,892	6,705	35%
Rhode Island	41,979	19,294	46%

Stigma Associated With Participation in WIC

★ Nationally, many participants express frustration that stores do not have signs indicating which items are WIC-eligible and feel stigmatized by store employees and other customers during checkout. Granting flexibility for the quantity of items purchased, improving signage for eligible products, allowing WIC items to be rung up along with SNAP and other food purchases, and allowing self-checkout for WIC items may help to reduce stigma.^{19,20}

Underutilization and Policy Recommendations

★ Waivers granted by the federal government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic provided flexibility in enrollment, benefit issuance, and redemption, and the flexibility of these waivers was extended in the *2021 American Rescue Plan*. Allowing WIC applicants and participants the option of telephone and videoconference appointments, offering evening and weekend appointments, allowing participants to submit eligibility documents electronically, and developing mobile apps or portals for participants to make and change appointments can improve participation and retention rates and limit participants' need to miss work or school.²¹

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Estimated Number Eligible: Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services, Medicaid Management Information System, September 30, 2023.

Number Enrolled: Rhode Island Department of Health, WIC Program, September 2023.

Note: WIC participation rates in this Factbook and the 2023 Factbook are based on a single date in September. Factbooks from 2020-2022 used a reference date in June, and Factbooks prior to 2020 used a September 30 reference date, with the exception of the 2011 Factbook, which used a July reference date. Additionally, since 2007, the "estimated number eligible" is based on calculations done by the Rhode Island Department of Health to determine the number of pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children under age five who live in families with an income less than 185% of the federal poverty level. In previous years, the "estimated number eligible" was based on 2000 Census data (2005 and 2006 Factbooks) and 1990 Census data (all Factbooks prior to 2005).

EOHHS data indicated that there were 670 women, infants, or children eligible who had an unknown residence. These are included in the Rhode Island state total but not assigned to any city or town.

Core cities are Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

References

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2022). *The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC program)*. Retrieved February 28, 2023, from www.fns.usda.gov

^{2,3,6,9} Carlson, S., & Neuberger, Z. (2021). *WIC works: Addressing the nutrition and health needs of low-income families for more than four decades*. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

⁴ Coleman-Jensen, A., McFall, W., & Nord, M. (2013). *Food insecurity in households with children: Prevalence, severity, and household characteristics, 2010-11*, EIB-113. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

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