



Promoting Strong Families through TANF

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program plays a key role in promoting strength and stability for families experiencing poverty. By helping families to meet their basic needs, obtain employment, and nurture healthy family relationships, TANF programs can foster long-term family wellbeing and economic independence. States have significant flexibility to use TANF funds to address unique family needs and accomplish any of the four purposes of TANF, including:

1. Assisting families so children can be cared for in their own homes or the homes of relatives;
2. Reducing the dependency of parents in need by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
3. Preventing pregnancies among unmarried persons; and
4. Encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.ⁱ

Supported by the Office of Family Assistance's Peer-Based Training and Technical Assistance (PeerTA) contract, this is one part of a series of briefs that highlight innovative and strategic ways that states are leveraging TANF funds to strengthen families and communities by building capacity for self-sufficiency and economic independence. Other parts of this brief include spotlights on healthy relationship initiatives, child protective services prevention, stress management supports for mothers, and kinship navigator programs. For additional information on the TANF program and its legislative framework, please refer to the Office of Family Assistance's TANF Laws and Regulations page.

TANF and WIC Connections to Support Family Preservation

Food security and nutrition are a vital part of children's well-being. There are several public benefit programs that exist explicitly to address food insecurity, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Families also can use monthly cash benefits provided through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families to help meet their nutritional needs. All these programs provide support for families so children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of their relatives (i.e., the first purpose of TANF). However, even with these programs in place, food insecurity remains prevalent among vulnerable children and families. For example, in 2021, 4.6 million households with children faced food insecurity, meaning their access to food was limited by a lack of money or other resources (e.g., grocery stores).ⁱⁱ To help more individuals experiencing food insecurity benefit from these federal assistance programs, state and local human service agencies can put policies and procedures in place to ensure families who receive monthly TANF benefits receive the nutrition benefits for which they are eligible. While most families enrolled in TANF receive SNAP benefits, many TANF families who would be eligible for WIC benefits do not receive them.

WIC and TANF

WIC provides benefits for pregnant, breastfeeding and post-partumⁱⁱⁱ women, infants, and children up to age 5, including—

- Nutritious supplemental foods
- Nutrition education and counseling, including breastfeeding promotion and support
- Referrals to healthcare, social services (e.g., TANF, Safe Harbor), and other community providers

Eligibility for participation includes determination of nutritional risk (typically carried out in-person at a WIC clinic), as well as income and residency requirements. During clinic appointments, most WIC participants are

also required to provide height, weight, hematological measurements. WIC benefits help maintain and improve the health and development of infants and children who are at nutritional risk. For women, WIC seeks to improve dietary intake and promote breastfeeding as the best source of infant nutrition.

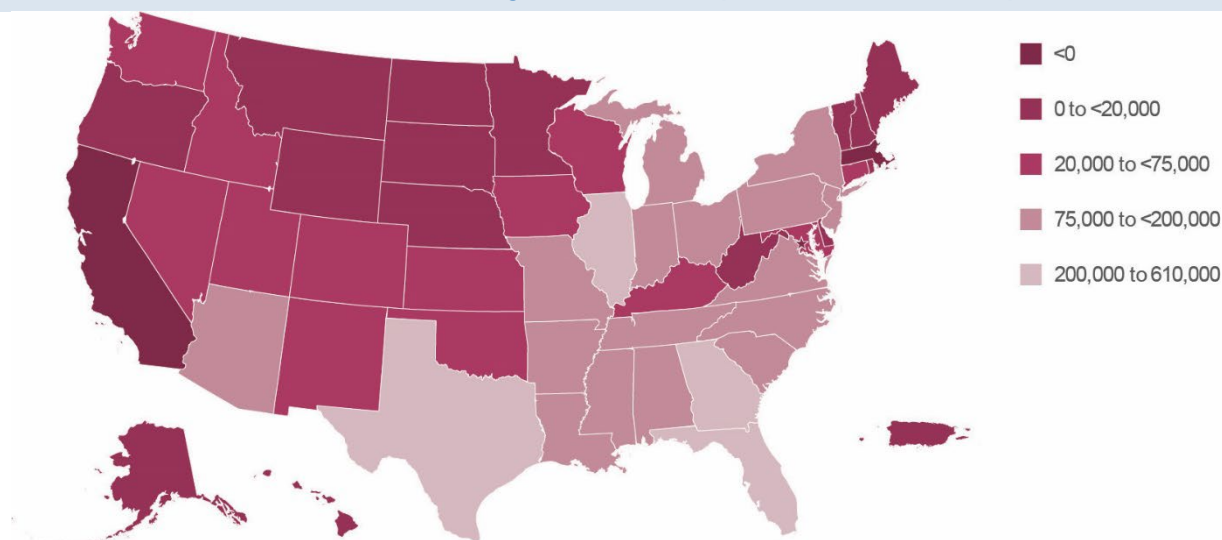
While WIC participant satisfaction has increased over time and remains high^{iv}, aspects of the program can impact families' decisions to participate. Some participants who chose to leave WIC referred to negative experiences in the clinic (e.g., difficulty making appointments), as well as negative experiences while shopping for WIC foods (e.g., difficulty finding items).^{v,vi}

TANF provides funding through block grants to State agencies to help low-income families with children achieve economic self-sufficiency. State agencies have the flexibility to use funding in a variety of ways, including monthly cash assistance payments and a wide range of services designed to address one or more of the program's four broad purposes. WIC applicants are considered income-eligible for the program if they can document participation in TANF, SNAP, or Medicaid. TANF recipients, however, cannot be automatically enrolled in WIC, because there are additional eligibility requirements beyond income.

WIC and TANF Participation

Among the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico in fiscal year (FY) 2022, about 6.3 million individuals participated in WIC^{vii} compared to about 780 thousand individuals participating in TANF^{viii}. On average, in calendar year (CY) 2022, about 5.5 million people were eligible for WIC and were not participating (hereafter referred to as *WIC-eligible non-participants*).^{ix} WIC-eligible non-participating caseloads were larger than TANF caseloads in 49 of the 50 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico (see Exhibit 1). In about one-third of the remaining States, the number of WIC-eligible non-participants was only up to 20,000 individuals higher than TANF caseloads, and in four States, the number of WIC-eligible non-participants was 200,000 to 610,000 individuals higher. This suggests there are many individuals across the country who are participating in TANF and may be eligible for but missing the opportunity to receive WIC benefits.

Exhibit 1. Difference in Number of WIC-Eligible Non-Participants and TANF Participants, 2022



Notes: Data are shown for the 50 States and the District of Columbia. Legend categories provide the number of WIC-eligible non-participants subtracted by the number of TANF participants.

Sources: FY 2022 TANF Data Tables from <https://acf.gov/ofa/data/tanf-caseload-data-2022>; CY 2022 WIC Coverage Rates by State and Participant Category Data from [https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/wic/er-2022#:~:text=The%20average%20monthly%20WIC%20Eligible,from%202021%20\(51.2%20percent\)](https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/wic/er-2022#:~:text=The%20average%20monthly%20WIC%20Eligible,from%202021%20(51.2%20percent)).

Connecting TANF and WIC

The gap between TANF and WIC participation suggests there is room to increase support for families in need. Connecting more families with vital programs—like WIC—can serve to fulfill the first statutory purpose of TANF. That is, to **provide support for families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of their relatives**. State TANF agencies could work to increase participation in WIC among TANF families by taking advantage of opportunities to make more connections between these two programs, ultimately propelling families into more successful futures. Examples include (1) co-location of staff and/or services and building relationships with WIC staff, (2) prioritizing referrals to WIC, (3) providing information on what WIC is and how to apply (e.g., steps to take), (3) making WIC appointments for TANF families, (4) bolstering connections with SNAP and Medicaid services, and thus, additional connections to WIC services, and (5) including information on WIC (e.g., eligibility, how to apply) on TANF websites.

ⁱ Office of Family Assistance. (2024). *About TANF*. <https://acf.gov/ofa/programs/tanf/about>

ⁱⁱ Coleman-Jensen, A. Rabbitt, M.P., Gregory, C.A. & Singh, A. (2022). *Household food security in the United States in 2021*. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=104655>

ⁱⁱⁱ Women up to 6 months post-partum who are not breastfeeding or minimally breastfeeding may be prescribed food packages (see Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, 1985)..

^{iv} Magness, A., et al. (2021). Third national survey of WIC Participants (NSWP-III): Brief Reports 1-10. Prepared by Capital Consulting Corporation and 2M Research Services. Contract No. AG-3198-K-15-0077. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Karen Castellanos-Brown. www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.

^v Chauvenet, C., De Marco, M., Barnes, C., & Ammerman, A. S. (2018). WIC recipients in the retail environment: A qualitative study assessing customer experience and satisfaction. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 119(3), 416–424.e2. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2018.09.003>.

^{vi} Leone, L., Haynes-Maslow, L., Kasprzak, C., Raja, S., & Epstein, L. (2022). The WIC shopping experience: A qualitative study examining retail-based strategies to increase WIC retention and redemption rates. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 17:4, 460-4740. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2021.1915906>

^{vii} FY 2022 Monthly WIC Data Tables: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/wic-program> USDA. (2025) *WIC data tables*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/wic-program>

^{viii} FY 2022 Office of Family Assistance. (2023). *TANF Data Tables: caseload data 2022*. <https://acf.gov/ofa/data/tanf-caseload-data-2022>

^{ix} CYUSDA. (2025). *National- and state-level estimates of WIC eligibility and program reach in 2022* WIC Coverage Rates by State and Participant Category Data:. [https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/wic/ee-2022#:~:text=The%20average%20monthly%20WIC%20Deligible,from%202021%20\(51.2%20percent\).](https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/wic/ee-2022#:~:text=The%20average%20monthly%20WIC%20Deligible,from%202021%20(51.2%20percent).)

PeerTA. Sponsored by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), PeerTA provides individual and group technical assistance and other supports to help Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) implement best practices and ensure compliance with TANF statutory purposes. PeerTA is led by MEF Associates and The Adjacent Possible.