

Participation in the US Federal Nutrition Assistance Program (WIC) Across Urban-Rural Communities: A Cross-sectional Study on Perceived Motivators and Barriers

Tirna Purkait¹, Dipti A. Dev²; Natalie Koziol³, Lisa Franzen-Castle⁴

¹ Doctoral Candidate, Department of Nutrition and Health Sciences, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, USA, tpurkait2@huskers.unl.edu

² Betti and Richard Robinson Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, USA

³ Nebraska Academy for Methodology, Analytics and Psychometrics (MAP Academy), Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools (CYFS), University of Nebraska–Lincoln, USA

⁴ Professor and Extension Nutrition Specialist, Nutrition & Health Sciences, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, USA

Background & Objective: The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) serves as a critical safety net for 7 million low-income mothers and children in the United States, providing essential nutrition resources and healthcare support. However, participation rates vary across geographic areas. The current study examines the perceived motivators and barriers influencing WIC participation in urban and rural Nebraska, a relatively understudied state in the Great Plains region of the US, to address disparities in WIC's reach.

Method: This cross-sectional study, part of the SNAP-Ed Nebraska Needs and Assets Assessment, included low-income households with at least one child aged under six years ($n=1,116$ [$n=801$ urban; $n=315$ rural]). Logistic regression with Benjamini-Hochberg correction was used to assess the association between urban-rural status and perceived motivators and barriers to participation, controlling for race/ethnicity, income, and education level, with significance set at a corrected p-value of $\alpha=0.05$.

Result: The findings revealed that receiving nutrition education was perceived as the top reported motivator, while difficulty traveling to WIC clinics was the top barrier. Regarding urban-rural disparities, rural residents were more likely to perceive access to nutritious food ($p < .01$), breastfeeding support ($p < .01$), and healthcare referrals ($p < .05$) as significant motivators for WIC enrollment than urban residents. Conversely, urban residents were 1.7 times more likely to perceive difficulty traveling to WIC clinics ($p < .01$) as a barrier than their rural counterparts.

Conclusion: Optimizing WIC's equitable impact necessitates targeted interventions, encompassing improved urban public transportation and expanded rural access to healthy food, healthcare referrals, and breastfeeding support, to cater to the diverse needs of Nebraska's WIC beneficiaries. Future research could employ longitudinal and quasi-experimental designs and incorporate multi-state data to explore the dynamic nature of participation factors over time, enabling robust causal inferences and informing evidence-based policies.