

WIC Helps Infants and Toddlers Get Off to a Healthy Start

More than one in five U.S. children are at risk of hunger - but it doesn't have to be this way. Bread for the World's *Nourish Our Future* campaign urges our government to use its power and resources to make a historic impact on child hunger.

The **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children** – better known as **WIC** – is the premier U.S. public health nutrition program for pregnant women, mothers, and children up to age 5. In 2023 (the last year for which there is data), the program served nearly 7 million participants per month, including almost 40 percent of all infants in the United States.

Most WIC participants live below the poverty line, which, for a family of three in 2024, is \$25,820. WIC enables families to purchase additional nutritious foods and provides health care referrals and information on healthy eating.

In 1967, Senator Robert F. Kennedy made a famous fact-finding trip to one of the poorest regions of the country, the Mississippi Delta. He brought along an entourage of reporters and photographers. One of the most searing images from that visit was of Kennedy cradling a listless toddler, a child he could not coax into responding to him. Families, healthcare providers, and aid workers in the poorest parts of the world would recognize this child's condition as severe malnutrition.

Infants and toddlers with severe malnutrition are nowhere to be found in the U.S. today. This progress is largely due to WIC. WIC was launched as a pilot project in 1972, and it became a permanent program in 1975. Today, it is the nation's third largest nutrition program, behind the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the National School Lunch Program.

One of Bread for the World's first actions addressing domestic hunger was to help secure an expansion of WIC in 1978. It was the first of many Bread efforts to strengthen WIC and ensure that members of Congress recognized its value.

WIC's contributions to public health cannot be overstated:¹

- WIC provides participating pregnant women with prenatal health care.
- WIC improves the dietary intake of pregnant and postpartum women.

- WIC has been shown to improve breastfeeding rates.
- WIC reduces the rates of low birthweight and premature birth.
- WIC reduces stillbirth and infant mortality.
- WIC improves the growth of nutritionally at-risk infants and children.
- WIC boosts children’s intellectual development and helps them get ready to start school.
- WIC’s nutrition education has been shown to increase the consumption of healthy foods.

WIC is a worthwhile investment, not only in the health and well-being of participating families, but in the health of our nation. It contributes to immense savings in health care that benefit society at large. Every dollar invested in WIC saves at least \$2.48 in medical, educational, and productivity costs.

WIC has typically enjoyed broad bipartisan support. But this is not something that can be taken for granted. The stakes are high. If Congress fails to appropriate enough funding for the program to meet rising demand, families could be turned away for the first time in decades. In their efforts to cut federal spending, some members of Congress have opposed funding WIC at the level needed to serve all eligible applicants.

Along with a bipartisan commitment to full funding, it is also vital that Congress reduce barriers and improve access to WIC by providing electronic and telehealth options so that families can become certified and recertified for the program, conduct appointments, and receive benefit payments without burdensome in-person visits.

As Bread for the World celebrates 50 years of WIC— and our own 50th anniversary—we are urging Congress to:

- 1** Recommit to fully funding WIC now and in the future, so that all who apply and are eligible have access.
- 2** Strengthen the program through reforms that make it easier for families to enroll in WIC and access its vital assistance. 🍌

Endnotes:

¹ <https://media.nwica.org/proven-outcomes.pdf>