

# Latina experiences participating in WIC before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Background

Over one third of WIC participants identify as Latina, but their participation has been declining since 2009.<sup>1</sup> During the pandemic, there were policy changes to the WIC program, including remote enrollment and recertification and an increase in the Cash Value Benefit (CVB).<sup>2</sup> Few studies have focused on Spanish-speaking Latina perceptions about the WIC program before and during the pandemic.

## Methods

We conducted 18 virtual in-depth-interviews in Spanish with Spanish-speaking Latina WIC participants living in North Carolina in August of 2022 using a semi-structured guide. We recorded, transcribed, and coded all interviews. We used thematic analysis with deductive and inductive coding to derive key themes.

## Results

Themes identified included: perceptions of WIC food packages and suggested improvements, facilitators, and barriers to use WIC, positive and negative experiences using WIC during the pandemic, and need for improved communications from WIC. Perceptions about WIC were mixed, with positive thoughts about the healthfulness of the foods included, and negative perceptions about the benefit amounts perceived to be too low and cultural appropriateness of food options. Pandemic policy changes were positively perceived; however, barriers to using benefits included limited communication from WIC agencies, and concerns about not being granted U.S. citizenship due to use of WIC (i.e., Public Charge).

## Key findings and representative quotes

Food packages not meeting cultural preferences and needs

*"I don't like the juice, I rarely use the full amount, I just pick one because I don't give sugary beverages to my son" - Mother of 1, 26 years*

Lack of awareness and communication about changes to CVB amounts in 2021

*"I called the WIC office to tell them that they made a mistake [about the CVB amount] and... on those times the offices were closed, and no one answered... and so on the first and second month I didn't use the whole benefit... I thought that maybe I would be stealing from someone that needed it more than me." -Mother of 6, 42 years*

Uncertainty surrounding changes to the Public Charge rule limited the use of WIC benefits

*"When I was pregnant, I didn't participate in WIC because they told me that I couldn't due to my immigration status... They (WIC staff) told me 'I cannot assure you that you can or not (participate in WIC).' -Mother of 2, 40 years*

## Implications

Findings surrounding the cultural appropriateness of food packages support proposed USDA changes to the WIC food packages. Communication challenges highlight the need for changes within WIC to improve/support participation and retention among Latinas. Concerns about the Public Charge rule emphasize the need for accurate and accessible information about public assistance programs for undocumented Latino immigrants.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our research partners: El Centro Hispano, NC DHHS, and GFRP, as well as our funders: CPC and NC TRaCS.

## References

1. USDA FNS. Eligibility and program reach estimates. 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/WIC2020eligibility>
2. USDA FNS. Implementation of the extending government funding and delivering emergency assistance act temporary increase in the CVV benefit for fruit and vegetable purchases. 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/4xzcssf2>