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# Data Development Initiatives for Research on Food Assistance and Nutrition Programs, Phase I—Ten Potential Data Initiatives

## Final Report

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### Abstract

Sound research on Federal food assistance programs requires high-quality data. This report describes 10 potential data development initiatives, each of which holds promise for improving the quality or reducing the cost of data resources at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The initiatives were selected to reflect the research needs of all three of the largest Federal food assistance programs: the Food Stamp Program (FSP), the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the National School Lunch Program (NLSP). The initiatives also were chosen to provide information for several types of research, especially the measurement of program impacts and the dynamics of program participation. The initiatives were developed by a consortium of research organizations, made up of The Urban Institute, Health Systems Research, Inc., and the Research Triangle Institute. In a second phase of this project, the consortium will produce a more detailed task list and cost estimate for three of the initiatives discussed in this report. If USDA chooses to pursue one or more of these initiatives, this second phase will provide a foundation for further development.

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## Executive Summary

Experts have increasingly recognized the potential value of new information resources for research on U.S. food assistance and nutrition programs. A 1998 expert workshop, convened by three committees at the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), emphasized the importance of data development initiatives. The workshop's report recommended that program data collection at the individual, local, State, or national level be related to research questions that are relevant to current policy, as well as lead to new research.

Two additional reports promoted interest in developing data resources for research. The first, by Hotz et al. (1998), summarized the importance of using administrative data for research purposes. The second, by UC-Data (1999), surveyed 26 States about their capabilities to use administrative data for research purposes. The reports showed that there is a strong interest in developing improved data resources that could: enhance existing data systems; link existing administrative data sources; expand one-time research projects, and use new technologies (e.g., the Internet) to create new data resources.

This report describes 10 potential data development initiatives, each of which holds promise for improving the quality or reducing the cost of data resources in USDA's major food assistance programs. The initiatives reflect the research needs of all three of the largest Federal food assistance programs: the Food Stamp Program (FSP), the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the National School Lunch Program (NLSP). The initiatives also were chosen to provide information for several types of research, especially the measurement of program impacts and the dynamics of program participation.

The initiatives were developed by a consortium of research organizations—The Urban Institute, Health Systems Research, Inc., and the Research Triangle Institute. The consortium first identified 10 data collection or enhancement initiatives with the potential to improve the utility and cost-effectiveness of research on Federal food assistance and nutrition programs (Phase I). In later work, the consortium will develop implementation plans and conduct cost-efficiency analysis on 3 of the 10 options selected by USDA (Phase II).

The 10 potential data initiatives fall into 4 categories, as follows:

### **(1) Addressing inadequacies of current data resources:**

*Micro-level database of Food Stamp Program participation records.* Proposes to develop a national micro-level FSP database from local and/or State administrative records, similar to that of WIC program and its Participant Characteristics (WIC-PC) database.

*Building aggregated administrative statistics from local agency records on the National School Lunch Program.* Proposes to build an aggregated database from existing tabulations and summaries of local agency records, as well as potentially expanding the set of aggregate counts produced to strengthen the dataset.

*Matching State WIC program administrative data with point-of-sale grocery store transaction data.* Would build upon an earlier USDA-sponsored study to examine the food purchasing patterns of WIC Program participants using scanning systems at the point of sale.

**(2) Using new data technologies to improve the quality, or lower the cost, of data resources:**

*Using the Internet to collect program data from State and/or local agencies.* Proposes to use surveys administered from a central website location to collect program data from State and/or local agencies.

*Using a probability-based Web-enabled panel to collect data from low-income families through the Internet.* Proposes to use Web-based surveys, implemented through Web-enabled television, to collect data from low-income families.

*Geographic information system (GIS) Internet map server (IMS) applications for project management and data analysis.* Proposes to highlight a number of potential IMS applications for food assistance programs and requirements for their implementation, including map-based eligibility determinations for nutrition assistance program participants and locational analysis for the siting of new services.

**(3) Expanding one-time projects to provide ongoing or national data resources:**

*Extension of State projects linking administrative data across programs and over time to food and nutrition topics.* Would assess whether the micro-level information in existing linked State administrative files (e.g., Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) could be used in their current form, or, with slight modification, to address issues related to food assistance and nutrition programs.

**(4) Creating new data resources by linking existing data:**

*Micro-matching of SIPP and CPS records to food stamp administrative records.* Proposes to link food stamp administrative records from various States (or from a national database) to Census records from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) and Current Population Survey (CPS).

*Matching WIC administrative records with Medicaid and vital records data.* Proposes to link WIC, Medicaid, and vital records data at the micro level. Merged datasets of this sort would enable States to do a much better job of monitoring outcomes for WIC clients.

*Linking data on students' school performance with administrative records on NSLP participation.* Proposes to link either micro-level or aggregated (e.g., at the school level) information on student educational outcomes (e.g., student test data, attendance data, incidence rates for disciplinary actions, retention and graduation rates) with similarly structured administrative data on National School Lunch Program/School Breakfast Program participation.