

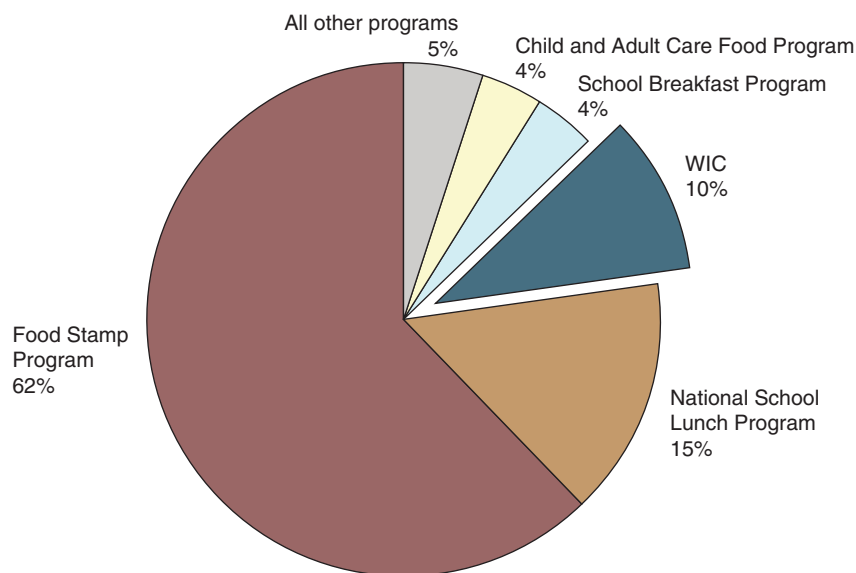
## Introduction

The mission of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is to safeguard the health of low-income women, infants, and children ages 1-4 who are at nutritional risk by providing supplemental food, nutrition education, and referrals to health care and other social services. WIC is based on the premise that early intervention programs during critical times of growth and development can help prevent future medical and developmental problems. Administered at the Federal level by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the program provides grants for supplemental foods, nutrition services, and administration to 90 WIC State agencies, including all 50 States, the District of Columbia, 34 Indian Tribal Organizations, and 5 territories (Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands).

Since its establishment in 1972, WIC has become one of the central components of the Nation's food and nutrition assistance system. With Federal expenditures of \$6.2 billion in FY 2008—or 10 percent of total USDA expenditures for domestic food and nutrition assistance—WIC is the country's third-largest food and nutrition assistance program, trailing only the Food Stamp Program (\$37.5 billion) and the National School Lunch Program (\$9.3 billion) (USDA, 2008b) (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> WIC was the fastest growing food assistance program in FY 2008 in terms of Federal expenditures, growing 15 percent over the previous year. WIC served an average of 8.7 million participants per month during FY 2008.

<sup>1</sup> The 2008 Farm Bill changed the name of the Food Stamp Program to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) effective October 1, 2008. This report continues to use the older name because most of the references to the program cited were prior to the change.

Figure 1  
**USDA expenditures for food and nutrition assistance program, FY 2008**



Note: USDA expenditures for food and nutrition assistance totaled \$60.7 billion in FY 2008. Source: USDA, 2008b.

The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-265), which authorized funds for WIC and child nutrition programs, is set to expire on September 30, 2009. Reauthorization provides an opportunity for policymakers to examine the operation and effectiveness of the program. This report updates a previous report released in 2002 (Oliveira et al., 2002).<sup>2</sup> Specifically, this report provides information on how the program works, WIC's legislative and regulatory history, program trends with regard to costs and participation levels, and the characteristics of the population WIC serves. It also examines current issues facing WIC, focusing mainly on those with important economic implications.

<sup>2</sup> Since that time, important changes to the program have been implemented and new research published, necessitating an updated version of the report.