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Waiving Physical Presence Requirements During the COVID-19 Pandemic Increased WIC Caseloads

Colleen Heflin, William Clay Fannin, Leonard Lopoo, and Camille Barbin

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government relaxed the physical presence requirements for applicants of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to reduce the associated health risks for pregnant women, new mothers, and young children. The third largest nutrition assistance program in the country, WIC is a federal health and nutrition program serving low-income expecting and postpartum mothers, infants, and children up to the age of 5.¹ Participating families receive grocery subsidies for an approved list of foods, health screenings, and nutrition counseling.

The COVID-19 waivers were the first time that physical presence requirements have been lifted for WIC applicants. County-level administrators were granted discretion to maintain or waive the requirements. Many scholars consider in-person application requirements an administrative burden that can constrain access to social services, but the causality of specific burdens on WIC has not previously been shown.

This brief summarizes findings from [our recent study](#), which compares WIC caseload data collected across 738 counties in 10 U.S. states between January 2019 and May 2021.² The analysis considers waiver use along with various approaches to promote social distancing during the application process to determine how barriers created by in-person requirements may

KEY FINDINGS



During the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government allowed county administrators to waive in-person requirements for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) applicants and beneficiaries.



85% of counties surveyed chose to exercise this option.



Waiving physical presence requirements and offering digital document submission options increased WIC participation by 11% across surveyed counties

have inhibited participation in WIC. We also studied county-level characteristics including demographic, political, and economic attributes, along with COVID-19 responses and outcomes to determine if these factors impacted counties' likelihood to waive physical presence requirements. No characteristics were found to be significant predictors of waiver use.

85% of Counties Waived Physical Presence Requirements

We found that 85% of surveyed counties chose to waive the physical presence requirements.² 15% of counties still required applicants to go in-person to a WIC office to enroll in the program during the height of the pandemic. To resolve challenges in determining eligibility, 24% of waiver counties allowed applicants to verbally confirm their eligibility over the phone and 71% allowed applicants to

submit proof of eligibility through text, email, or web portals.

WIC Participation Increased 11% in Counties That Waived In-Person Requirements

Adoption of the physical-presence waiver increased WIC participation by 11% across surveyed counties, as shown in Figure 1. This relationship was only observed in counties that coupled the waiver with other policies that allowed applicants to complete the entire process from their homes. This relationship was not observed in counties that required applicants to appear outside of WIC offices to certify their benefits. These results further

show that administrative burdens tied to in-person requirements, such as transportation barriers, time, stress, and social stigma, may hinder WIC enrollment and retention.

If policymakers decide to remove or relax physical presence requirements, this must be done along with increasing agency capacity to handle modern document submission options, such as email, text, or web portals. Given that self-attestation for eligibility is not an acceptable practice outside of the limitations of the pandemic, expected enrollment impacts for relaxing in-person requirements coupled with virtual document submission options should be tempered.

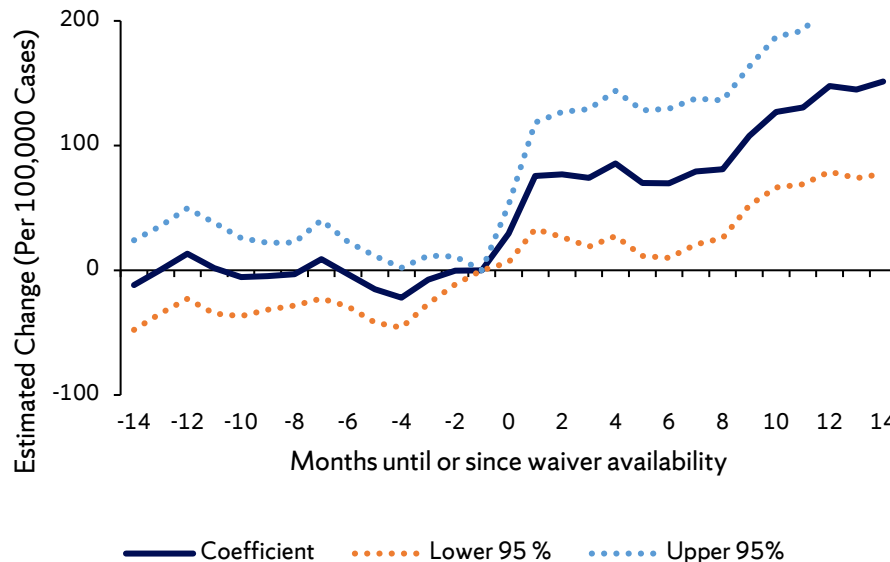


Figure 1: Event-Study Estimates of Impact of Physical Presence Waiver on WIC Caseloads (per 100,000) from January 2019 to May 2021.

Data Source: Heflin, C. Fannin, W. C., and Lopoo, L. (2023).¹

Note: Figure plots coefficients and 95% confidence intervals on indicators for time until or since WIC physical waiver availability. Model includes county and month-year fixed effects along with a full set of controls. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

Data and Methods

Our sample included 738 counties across 10 U.S. states (California, Colorado, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota,

Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin). Trained interviewers collected data about waiver use and eligibility processes from 532 local agencies. These interviews were conducted over the phone between January and April 2021. Our analysis implements difference-in-difference and event-study

techniques using variation in waiver use across counties to estimate the impacts of the waiver on caseload size. Comprehensive methodological details can be found in [the published study](#).

References

1. United States Department of Agriculture. (2022). *The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC Program)* [Fact sheet].
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