

WIC BREASTFEEDING POLICY INVENTORY (SUMMARY)

Background

Breastfeeding promotion is a critical component of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which is administered by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. As such, every 2 years, the WIC Participant and Program Characteristics (WIC PC) Report collects WIC breastfeeding initiation and duration information. Breastfeeding rates vary by State, and some WIC State agencies (SAs) and local agencies (LAs) have developed their own methods to track breastfeeding measures.

FNS funded the WIC Breastfeeding Policy Inventory (WIC BPI) to collect data on breastfeeding policies and practices, as well as the breastfeeding measures in use by SAs and LAs.

Methods

The WIC BPI was a census of the 90 WIC State agencies (including Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) and U.S. Territories) and the approximately 1,800 local WIC agencies. The study collected data in 2013 through a two-part survey and had very high response rates for all groups (100 percent of 51 States, including the District of Columbia, 80 percent of ITOs and Territories, and 91 percent of LAs).

Findings

Breastfeeding Policies and Practices

The WIC BPI collects data on both breastfeeding policies and practices that are required according to Federal regulations and those that are not required but are followed based on best practice recommendations. In 2013, local WIC agencies had in place an array of policies and practices to support breastfeeding:

- About 78 percent of local WIC agencies have at least one staff member with a certification in lactation counseling, consulting, education, or management.

- In addition to the training provided for the local WIC professional staff, 60 percent of local WIC clerical and support staff receive ongoing breastfeeding promotion training. Over three-fourths of these (77 percent) receive this training at least annually.
- A large majority of local WIC agencies' clinics maintain a breastfeeding-friendly environment. About 98 percent encourage participants to breastfeed anywhere in the clinic, and 88 percent provide private space for breastfeeding.
- WIC's local breastfeeding support extends beyond the WIC sites. About 89 percent collaborate with or extend outreach on breastfeeding promotion and support activities to hospitals, clinics, or doctors' offices, including one-third that provide in-hospital breastfeeding support to WIC mothers.
- Ninety-three percent of SAs reported operating or overseeing LAs that had peer counseling programs. Sixty-nine percent of LAs operated a peer counseling program. Among these LAs, the peer counseling program was available in an average of 83 percent of their clinic sites. These LAs served 86 percent of the WIC population. Among agencies operating a peer counseling program and providing direct services to participants, there were on average four peer counselors in LAs and seven peer counselors in SAs (Direct-serving SAs included nearly all ITOs and territories and seven States).

At the State level, 62 percent of WIC State agencies have a WIC breastfeeding committee, group, or workgroup that develops or oversees WIC breastfeeding policies and practices.

The full report provides additional detailed information on State and local WIC agency

policies and practices relating to breastfeeding promotion and support.

Breastfeeding Data Systems and Reporting

The WIC BPI also provides insight into how WIC agencies are storing breastfeeding data. For example:

- More than one-third of SAs and LAs reported storing breastfeeding information in an administrative system separate from the system used to certify WIC participants.
- Most often, LAs used other administrative systems for tracking breast pump issuance and peer counseling program data (62 and 61 percent, respectively).
- Few agencies reported linking breastfeeding data in their WIC information system with other data sources. The most common uses for those that did were service delivery or program management.

The Collection and Measurement of Breastfeeding Outcomes

- The WIC BPI survey found that nearly all local WIC agencies collect information on breastfeeding initiation, duration, and exclusivity while fewer collect breastfeeding intensity (51 percent).
- Not surprisingly, intensity is considered the most difficult to report of these measures with SAs and LAs perceiving that they could provide intensity estimates only with great difficulty.
- Although WIC PC collects breastfeeding initiation and duration data, the guidance provided does not specify the exact questions that SAs and LAs are to use to collect the data. Thus, the WIC BPI also sheds light on the different ways LAs collect initiation and duration data:
 - The most common way local agencies assess duration is using a two-part question. The mother is asked if she is

still breastfeeding and, if the response is “No,” the mother is asked the date she stopped breastfeeding and duration is calculated. This method is used by about 40 percent of LAs.

- The second most common set of questions to assess duration are posed by 33 percent of LAs. In followup to the same first question, if a “No” response is provided, the mother is asked how long she gave breast milk to her baby.

Summary and Implications for Future Research

The WIC BPI is the first study to highlight the diversity of policies and practices that SAs and LAs use to promote and support breastfeeding. This study’s findings provide useful information on what SAs and LAs are collecting in terms of initiation, duration, exclusivity, and intensity. The findings could be used to enhance the current guidelines for reporting WIC PC initiation and duration information and can be used to suggest ways in which exclusivity and/or intensity information could be collected in the future.

In addition, information about WIC agencies’ data systems can help policymakers and program managers further understand current capabilities for collecting and monitoring breastfeeding outcomes and analyzing changes in breastfeeding rates over time. The data collected from this study may inform future efforts to standardize reporting of breastfeeding measures and the reporting of other breastfeeding policies and practices.

For More Information

Forrestal, S., Briefel, R., and Mabli, J. (2014). *WIC Breastfeeding Policy Inventory*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research. Project Officer: Karen Castellanos-Brown. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Available online at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ops/research-and-analysis>.