

## **Pandemic-Era WIC Participation in Delaware, U.S.: Participants' Experiences and Challenges**

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**Abstract :** Introduction: The COVID-19 pandemic posed unprecedented challenges for families with young children in the United States. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), a federal nutrition assistance program that provides low-income mothers and young children with access to healthy foods (e.g., infant formula, milk, and peanut butter), mitigated some financial challenges for families. However, the U.S. experienced a national infant formula shortage and rising inflation rates during the pandemic, which likely impacted WIC participants' shopping experiences and well-being. As such, this study aimed to characterize how the COVID-19 pandemic and related events impacted Delaware WIC participants' in-store benefit redemption experiences and overall well-being. Method: The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 51 WIC participants in Wilmington, Delaware. Survey measures included demographic questions and open-ended questions regarding participants' experiences with WIC benefit redemption during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were analyzed using a hybrid inductive and deductive coding approach. Findings: The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted WIC participants' shopping experiences and well-being. Specifically, participants were forced to alter their shopping behaviors to account for rising food prices (e.g., used coupons, bought less food, used food banks). Additionally, WIC participants experienced significant distress during the national infant formula shortage resulting from difficulty finding formula to feed their children. Participants also struggled with in-store benefit redemption due to inconsistencies in shelf labelling, the WIC app, and low stock of WIC foods. These findings highlight the need to reexamine WIC operations and emergency food response policy in the United States during times of crisis to optimize public health and ensure federal nutrition assistance programs meeting the needs of low-income families with young children.

**Keywords :** benefit redemption, COVID-19 pandemic, infant formula shortage, inflation, shopping, WIC

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