

Rural Retailers and WIC: Maximizing Partnerships to Improve Food Access in Rural Communities

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Background

- WIC is supplemental nutrition for women, infants, and children younger than age 5.
- Provides nutritious foods like fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and dairy.
- Offers one-on-one nutrition counseling with a registered dietitian.
- Provides extensive breastfeeding support with peer counselors and professional International Board Certified Lactation Specialists (IBCLCs).



Methods

A scoping review of current data was conducted to identify the impact of the changing rural vendor landscape on WIC participation and health outcomes.

WIC Outcomes

- 6.7** Million women, infants, and children served in 2025 across the US.
- 40%** Average number of infants in the US who are enrolled in the WIC program annually.
- 24%** Increased chances of delivering a healthy weight baby during pregnancy with WIC participation.
- \$1** For every \$1.00 invested in WIC an estimated \$2.50 is saved in medical costs.

The Changing Vendor Landscape

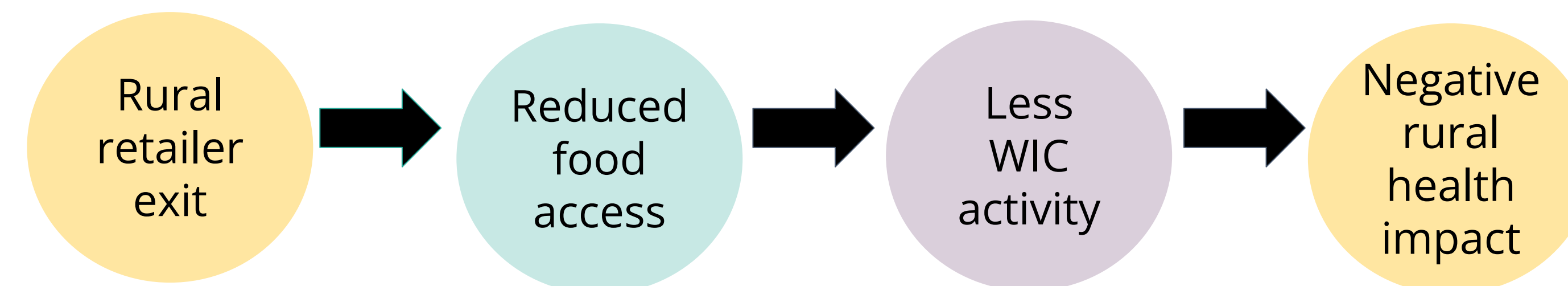
Nationally, WIC has experienced a 15% decline in the number of authorized retailers and food delivery entities over the last decade.

Independent retailers, who are the backbone of rural food access, represent 80% of the total decrease in WIC participating retailers.



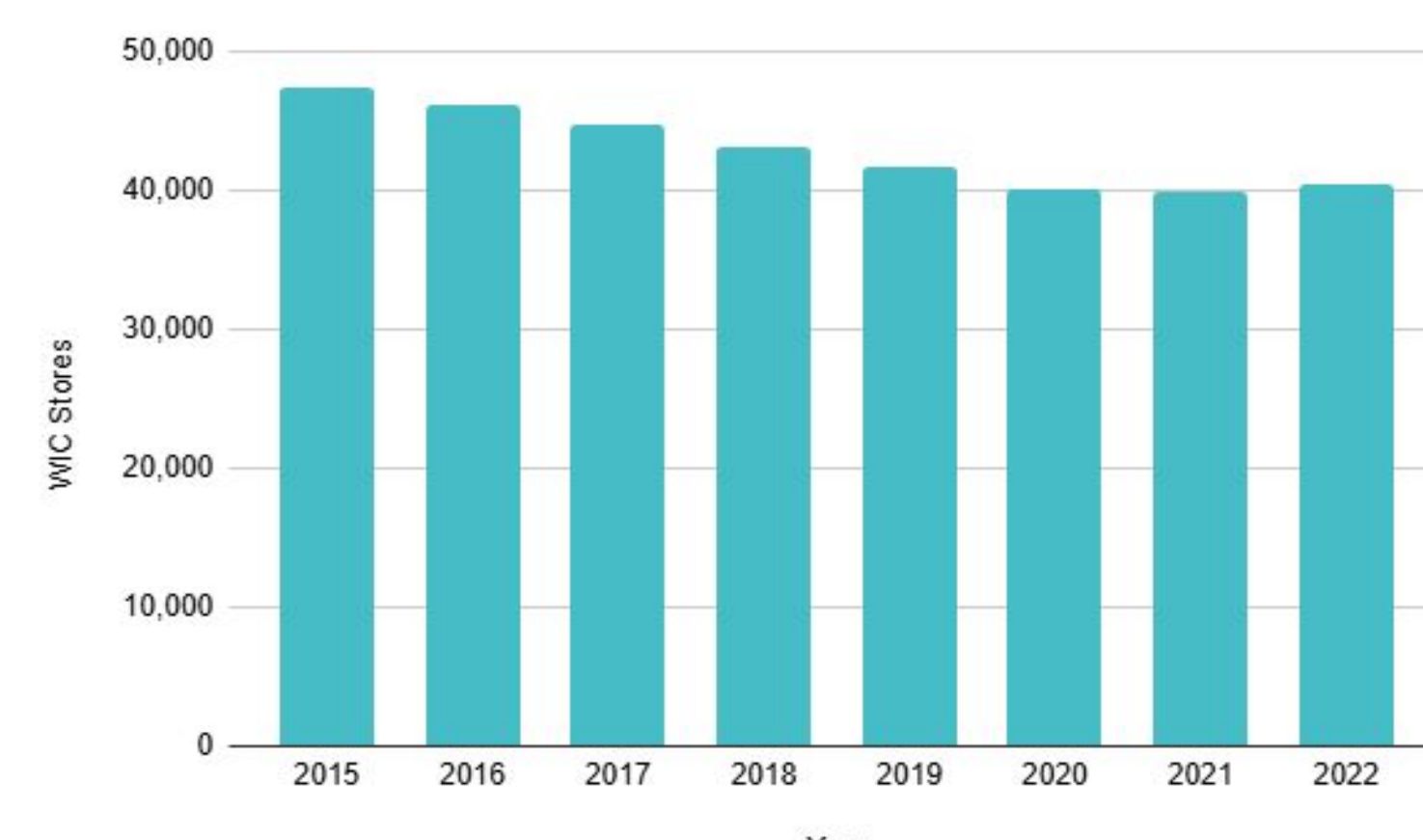
Stan's Mercantile, Circleville, Utah. 2025.

Increased Community Food Insecurity



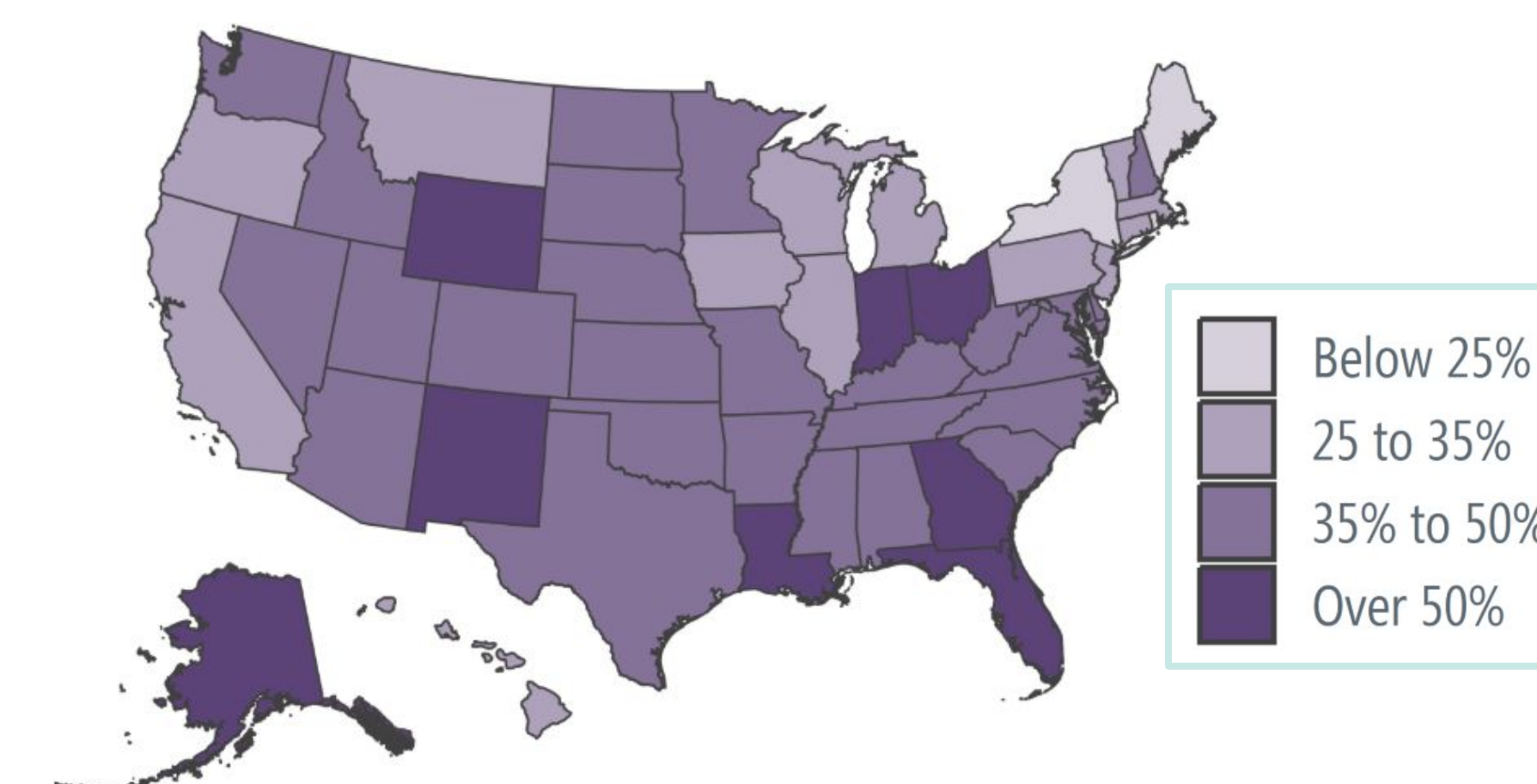
USDA, WIC Participant Access to Authorized Vendors Study - Part 1. (2025).

Figure 1. Number of WIC-authorized retailers and food delivery entities. 2015-2022.



USDA, WIC Participant Access to Authorized Vendors Study (2025).

Figure 2. Percentage of WIC-eligible families without convenient access to a retailer. 2022.



USDA, WIC Participant Access to Authorized Vendors Study (2025).

Recommendations

- Rural retailers should partner with WIC to improve the health of their community.
- WIC agencies should prioritize rural retailer partnerships and be flexible with oversight.



- Self-advocacy is key for retailers.
- Promote rural stores as family nutrition centers.
- Implement a WIC shelf tagging program.
- Update store inventory management system.
- WIC agencies should adjust policies and practices to align with the realities of rural retailers.

Conclusion

The effectiveness of the WIC program depends entirely on the availability of the healthy foods WIC offers. It is critical that rural retailers and state WIC agencies establish strong partnerships, and create opportunities to adapt policies and practices in ways that protect key nutrition benefits for women, infants, and children.

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